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Secularism – Australian Education's Established Religion

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As long ago as 1776, according to Harvard University's Barro and McLeary, a state or established religion was identified by Adam Smith as being an ideology that has a unique, most favoured status in a nation, determined, "partly through the limitations on entry of competitors and partly through [state] subsidies." (Barro & McCleary, 2004, p.3). Anglicanism is the established religion of England. Islam is the established religion of Iran. Buddhism is the established religion of Cambodia. For some of the twentieth century, communism was the established religion of Russia. Judaism is the established religion of Israel. And today, using Smith's definition, in education anyway, secularism has become, de facto, the established religion of Australia.

Some will protest this claim. First, they might argue that Australia has no established religion at all – that is, there is no religion in Australia which claims special favour in the life of the society and which, to some extent, is enshrined in law. Second, they might argue that secularism is not a religion anyway. This paper seeks to refute those two objections by exploring the meaning of the concept of religion, and by reflecting upon Australian history and contemporary culture to show the favoured place given to a secularist ideology in modern mainstream Australian schooling.

In fact, this paper argues that secularism has become a fundamentalist religion in Australia – that is, secularism is a belief system that is fiercely guarded by its adherents against all other religions and the superiority of which is an almost unquestioned and unquestionable mantra among many culture shapers and commentators in this nation. This has significant implications for education, particularly concerning justice and fairness, in our religiously pluralistic nation because, apart from optional settings around the margins of school activity, the general Australian classroom experience in public and many private schools, is preserved for the exclusive exercise of a secularist ideology.

Meaning of the term "Secular"

Despite the contrary contention of highly-respected and insightful scholars such as J. K. A. Smith (Smith, 2014, 20ff), the term "secular" has always been a word rooted in religion. According to Perkins (2011), in pre-modern times the term "secular" was used to distinguish between various forms of full-time ordained church officials within the Roman Catholic Church, with some categories of these people at times being referred to as secular or diocesan clergy. This distinction persists today, with sisters and brothers who have taken simple church vows, seen as secular clergy, whilst priests and nuns who have taken a second step of more solemn, enduring vows linked to a specific religious order, are seen as cloistered clergy (Saunders, 2003). In general, Catholic secular clergy live in the regular world, whilst non-secular clergy often live in nunneries and priories (Boudinhon, 1912). In this context, the term

"secular" was a special ecclesiastical word, and was never meant to have referred to something non-religious.

Although the general trend of her argument is antithetical to that of this paper, Marion Maddox in her book *Taking God to School* (2014) echoes the generally agreed perspective that the use of the term "secular" in the nineteenth century in Australia, when it was codified into law with reference to patterns of public schooling, reflected the meaning of the word as described in the previous paragraph. It related to the concept of cloister or the more over-arching term of denomination. Echoing the pattern of Forster's Education Act of 1870 in England, the term "secular" was included in laws such as the Education Act in Queensland in 1875, the Education Act in Victoria in 1872, the Public Instruction Act in New South Wales in 1880, the Education Act in Tasmania in 1885, the Elementary Education Amendment Act in Western Australia in 1893, and even the New Zealand Education Act in 1877.

The reason for all these state laws on education, and the use and meaning of the word "secular", related to the dramatic changes that were occurring in society in general, and education in particular, at that time. In the rapidly unfolding industrial age, and in a time when the franchise was no longer limited to the wealthy, it was becoming important for every prospective adult to have a rudimentary grasp of numeracy and literacy. In colonial Australia (and the same is true of New Zealand and some other colonies), the provision of schooling had mainly been carried out by Christian churches and missions. This meant that educational curricula were infused with the dogma, beliefs, and scriptures of those religions. For protestant denominations, biblical references were common, and in Roman Catholic schools, references to papal authority and church views of history and science for example, were accepted as the norm. The problem was that if schooling was to be extended to all children, churches did not have the resources to fund this or in the case of Protestant groups, often did not have the desire to carry it out. Roman Catholic authorities remained committed to providing education to their own parishioners, but most protestant churches were prepared to transfer the responsibility of schooling to the state as long as the education provided remained non-denominational (i.e. secular) and did not proselytise children into any specific cloister or denomination.

Thus the use of the term "secular" in the laws noted above meant that universal public schooling had to be overtly non-denominational. It was never intended to mean that schooling should be non-religious. As Australian historians have noted, a distinctly and overtly Christian worldview continued to underpin curriculum materials and pedagogical practises (Perkins, 2011, Campbell, 2014), and this was understood by most to be generally compatible with the secular (i.e. non-denominational) character of classroom activities.

Fast forward to the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century, and you have a very different story. Today, advocates of secularism in education claim that it encompasses a democratic ideal of pluralism, aspiring to the recognition and inclusion of religious and non-religious groups in societal structures like schools (Stratham, 2014). In reality however, secularism in education has now been re-defined to mean the exclusion of any ideological foundation in regular classrooms other than a positivistic, enlightenment-based worldview (i.e. only things that are observable and measurable are real). It champions the self-evident self-sufficiency of human reason, and assumes that anything else is a distorted understanding

of reality and has no place in the classroom. Ideas such as a belief in an interventionist God, and a reality beyond the observations of our basic senses, is seen as biased and divisive and as fanciful religious bigotry. Secularism claims not to be opposed to other religious perspectives, but nevertheless insists that only a secularist perspective has any right to underpin regular class instruction and pedagogy (Nugent, 2010). At best, God is an irrelevant irritant, and at worst God is hocus-pocus nonsense.

Some advocates of secularism in education bemoan what they see as the contemporary undermining of the secularist agenda in Australian public education. Macquarie University's Marion Maddox probably is the most ardent advocate of this position. She notes with alarm the rise of school chaplaincies, partial government funding for low-fee Christian schools, and the attempts by some groups such as Ken Ham's Creation Science Foundation to allow intelligent design belief about earth origins to be presented as alternatives to the curriculum-mandated evolutionary perspective. In her view, these are overtly religious interpretations of reality and they have no place in what she seems to understand to be Australia's non-religious secular education. (Maddox, 2014a)

Despite Maddox's concerns, the reality is that in large measure, a secularist perspective reigns supreme in much of education in Australia – even in many private schools. Apart from religious instruction as a marginal and optional activity, any understanding and practice of education in this country usually assumes the irrelevance of the non-secular. Thus questions about patterns of child development, or evaluation and assessment, or how to understand and teach key learning areas like mathematics or history or English, all assume that religious beliefs (other than secularism) have nothing to say about these matters, and that a secular approach to them would be equally plausible and acceptable to all religious groups. Secular principles provide the unexamined (and unexaminable) foundations for contemporary education. It's the water in which we swim, it's the air that we breathe. In this sense, and hence the title of this paper, secularism represents the ideological fundamentalism of modern Australian education – a mantra uncritically accepted as true, and apparently only questioned by religious bigots or ill-informed simpletons. Pryor, from Regent University, puts it this way:

> Most folks have been so long immersed in the sea of secularism that they no longer perceive the presuppositions that support it. What once was acknowledged as a "faith" (in the sense of foundational premises the consequences of which could explain the world, human nature, knowledge, etc.) has become received "fact." This explains the increasing marginalization of "non-believers" who operate outside the premises of secularism. (Pryor, 2014).

The Religious Nature of Secularism

It's evident from the direction of this paper, that we view secularism as another religion. The paper assumes that secularism, like Christianity, Islam, communism, or Judaism, is just one faith-based belief system among many. The paper repudiates the notion that "There are religions, and then there is the non-religion of secularism." This is a dramatic, and perhaps dangerous repudiation to make, for if secularism is validly described as a faith commitment or religion, then any attempt to make secularism the prime foundation block for Australian schools is not the removal of religion from the classroom, but is the imposition of a state-

funded religious monopoly on teaching and learning – a position that will alienate people of non-secular religions, and which has no place in pluralistic Australia.

To understand the claim that secularism is just one religion among many, we must explore a definition of the word "religion." According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2013), a religion is "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held with ardor and faith." This is an accurate description of Christianity, Islam – and also secularism. Confusion arises when people equate religion with theism. Theism is one sub-category of religion, atheism is another religious category, and there are hybrids as well. The diagram below shows the relationship.

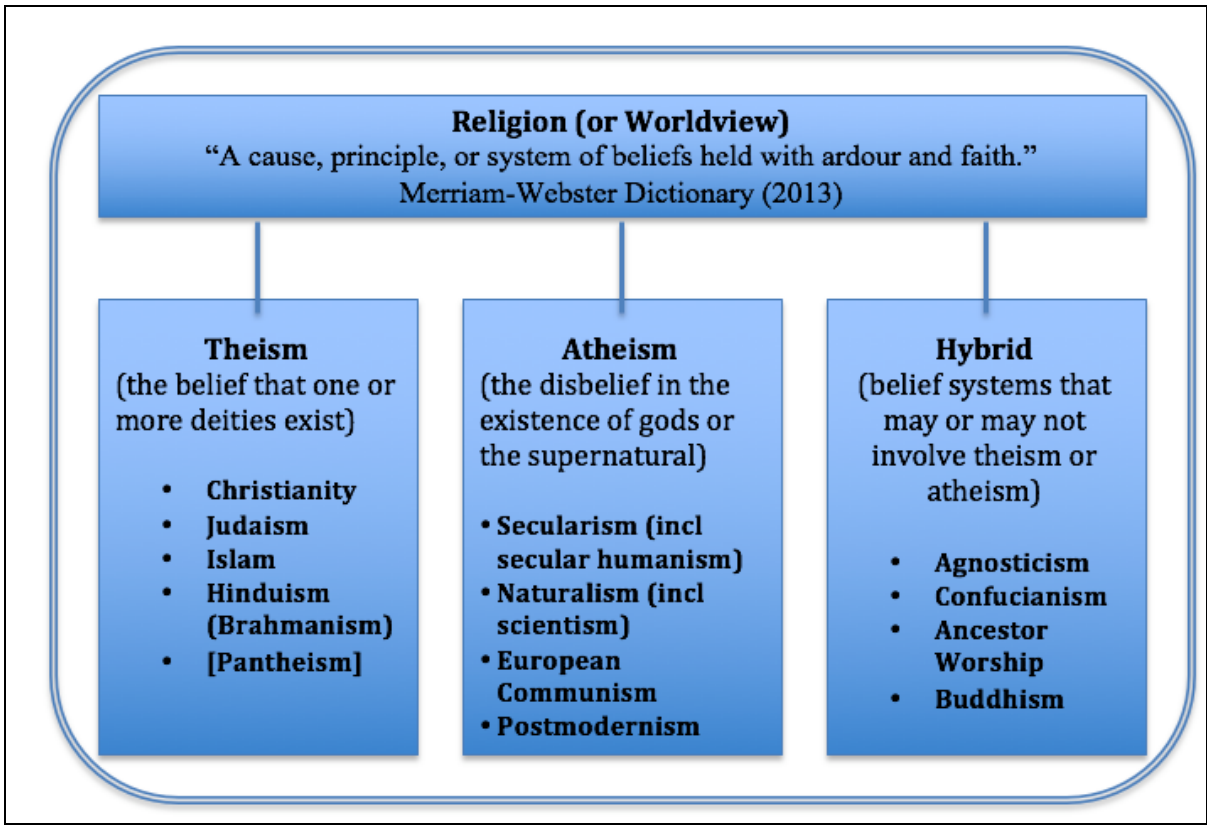

Fig. 1. Definition of Religion and its Sub-categories

An approach to life does not have to include a belief in God in order to be classified as a religion. As long as it involves a set of beliefs that are firmly held, as is the case with both Christianity and secularism, it is a religion. Secularists firmly believe that their rationalistic, positivist approach to reality is the only one that is valid, the only one that has a place in mainstream education. To the extent that in law, policy, and practice, this secular religion is state supported and underwritten as the ideological default position in general classroom pedagogy and activities, it has a most-favoured belief system status, so that in Adam Smith's terms, secularism has become Australian education's de facto established religion. For example, hear respected politician Senator Penny Wong repeat the error of this politically accepted mantra, showing once again its officially entrenched position in Australian politics and culture: "The application of religious belief to the framing of law in a secular society [like Australia]…leads not only to confusion, but also to inequity." (Wong, 2017, p.5)

Though they still use the term "religious" in a sense that excludes secularism, both Somerville (2014) with her concept of "the secular sacred", and Waldron (2014) with her recognition of the belief-based foundation of secularism, approach the definition and perspective advocated in this paper. Wilkinson (2014, p.59) reflects a supporting paradigm when she asserts that, "even this belief in a non-sectarian space is its own sort of religion."
Award-winning writer Dr. Elizabeth Farrelly (2014) repeats the mantra that, "Schools...should be free, secular and compulsory. This is the key to civilisation" (p. 3).
Here is the key point: the drive to eliminate religions other than secularism from the school or university classroom is not a drive to eliminate religion. There is no such thing as a religiously neutral white space. As Berg opines, "An ideologically neutral curriculum is a contradiction in terms" (Berg, 2014, p.2). The secularist paradigm is a drive to replace all other faith perspectives with its own – with the religion of secularism which demands sole and sovereign ownership of the public space. Such an intolerant claim would be ridiculed if made in the name of Islam or Christianity – and it should be equally as inexcusable in pluralistic societies as well when made in the name of the religion of secularism. It's the ultimate irony which, if it were not so serious would be almost amusing: secularists are using their complaint against the supposed interference of religion in the public space, in order to attempt to unilaterally smother that same space with their own autocratic and exclusivist religion, thus violating the supposed freedom from religion argument that they claim to espouse.

How Has Secularism in Education become so Pervasive?
We have seen how a richly religious understanding of the term "secular" in education has evolved over time into something that seeks to eschew non-secular religions altogether. How has this come about to the extent that even well-educated teachers seem unaware of the exclusive secularist worldview that is the hallowed turf of modern education? For an answer, we need to look for the key thinkers who have helped shape the contemporary western approach to education. An understanding of their worldview convictions, and their incorporation into teaching and learning, will give us a sense of what has happened here. There is no scope in this paper to conduct a broad survey, but a brief reflection upon two of the west's most influential educators with point to an answer to this question.

<u>John Dewey (1859-1952).</u> Once governments had taken control of education, they needed to deliver a product that was broadly acceptable to most people. The retreat of many denominations behind the wall of dualism or the sacred-secular divide meant that religions like Christianity were ripe for the argument that schooling was religiously neutral. Western education's most famous protagonist, John Dewey, was only too happy to fill this space with his own secular approach to education. Dewey has left a useful legacy concerning the value of discovery learning – an approach that Jesus demonstrated two thousand years earlier with his parables, his mission trips with his disciples, and with his questioning and active teaching techniques. However, Dewey espoused his enquiry-learning approach from the clear and determined perspective that reality has no supernatural aspect. Dewey, a signatory to the First and Second Humanist Manifestos, derided any belief in God or a heavenly being's influence on the world. For Dewey, a fictitious God and his way of looking at things was not the centre of the educational universe. In contrast, he claimed that the child was the centre around which the educational system revolved. For Dewey (1899), there was no point talking about the influence of a God in whom he did not believe. Real education was to be conducted to the exclusion of any other religious belief except for secularism[i]. Consequently, decades of

instruction in teacher training colleges, and decades of curriculum development and resource materials have followed in Dewey's secularist philosophical footsteps.

Richard Rorty (1931-2007). In recent decades, Rorty has been one of the most influential postmodern voices in contemporary education. He also has been very open about his abhorrence of every belief system other than secularism in the educational arena – even claiming that most American university professors in the humanities (including education) share his point of view (my underlining):

> I, like most Americans who teach humanities or social science in colleges and universities ... try to arrange things so that students who enter as bigoted, homophobic, religious fundamentalists will leave college with views more like our own ... The fundamentalist parents of our fundamentalist students think that the entire 'American liberal establishment' is engaged in a conspiracy. The parents have a point ... [W]e are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours ... I think those students are lucky to find themselves under the benevolent Herrschaft [domination] of people like me, and to have escaped the grip of their frightening, vicious, dangerous parents ... (Rorty, 2000, pp. 21-2)

IMPLICATIONS

1. The claim that secularism is just another religion is a dangerous claim and will raise the ire of many secularists. It explodes the current myth that the secularisation of the classroom is a neutral removal of religious bias. It also means that we should desist from using the false dichotomy of "faith-based schools" and "non-faith-based schools", since all schools, secular, Christian, or whatever, are always faith-based.
    a. To teach science from a secular perspective, as if God is not relevant, is not neutrality. It is a secularist denial of the gospel and is offensive to bible-believing Christians.
    b. To teach environmental studies without reference to the Genesis 1 principles of the cultural mandate and creational stewardship also is offensive to many Christians, but even the mention of such a perspective in public classrooms has been seen as contrary to the a priori commitment to a secular religious agenda, and so is eschewed from the curriculum.
    c. To teach our western history without recognising and celebrating the key role of Christian belief and practice in its development may be a secular approach to history, but it also is a revisionist perversion of that subject. It's interesting to note that Chinese communist researchers have concluded that Christianity is the single most important force in shaping the nature and strength of our civilization. Here's what the communist researchers concluded about the central key role of Christianity in giving the West its success – a factor that barely rates a mention in secularised Australian history classrooms today:

        > One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact the pre-eminence, of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more

> powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of [sympathetic] capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubts about this. (Reported by David Aikman, *Time Magazine's* former chief representative in Beijing, in his 2003 book, *Jesus in Beijing – How Christianity is transforming China*, pp. 5-6.

As Donnelly (2103) infers, any genuine study of our history and appropriate and positive acknowledgement of Christianity's central role in shaping who we are as a nation, has been airbrushed out of most of history studies in our schools because of a secularist agenda.

2. Unlike the religion of secularism with its totalitarian claims to education, Christianity upholds genuine plurality of practice. We do not seek the replacement of hegemonic secularism with enforced Christianity in every classroom. Rather, in modern, pluralistic societies like Australia, and especially in our schools, we argue for the right of the organs of public life to be free from under the yoke of a secular religious ascendancy. This is the best way forward not just for Christians, but for all religious persuasions – in other words, for all people everywhere. The Netherlands, in a pluralistic but generally cohesive culture, has shown a way forward with government endorsement for any social group to be equally supported (and held accountable) in devising educational approaches and institutions for their children. In his article on dis-establishing secularism in education, Glenn puts it this way:

> Government should play a significant role [in schooling], setting standards for essential outcomes on which there is a societal consensus and ensuring that family circumstances never prevent a child from receiving an adequate education, but public education should be no more synonymous with government-operated schools than public health is with government-operated hospitals. Parents should be free to choose the school their children attend without financial penalty.
>
> This is only possible if we give up the fruitless effort to make public education "neutral," as though anything so intimately associated with the shaping of human beings could ever avoid choices among alternative views of human flourishing. The sort of lowest common denominator schooling into which public schools have been forced, the "defensive teaching" in which their teachers engage to avoid controversy, can never provide a rich educational environment. Indeed, the false belief in neutrality has fostered an idea of teachers as a kind of secular clergy.
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> Social and political conflict based on religion subsided in Belgium, the Netherlands, and other countries only when they adopted laws giving equal access to public and private (mostly faith-based) schools through funding the latter based on the choices made by parents. (Glenn, 2012)

3. Because parental choice in education is a God-given responsibility, we strongly endorse the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26[2]) which states that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."
4. Christians in education believe that all approaches (including the masquerade of secularist objectivity) to curriculum design or to teaching key learning areas or to any other aspect of the educational enterprise, are not neutral but always nurture children in some religious understanding of the world, and that approaches other than a Christ-centred one distort reality and produce education that is less than it could be.
5. For its own schooling endeavours, Christians in education invite those who choose our schools to join with us in exploring the world and our places and tasks in it from a hope-filled, God-centred perspective. To paraphrase Wilson and Dabney (2012), as we look at the physical world around us, we don't spend all of our time looking at the sun directly. Rather, we look at everything else in the light that the sun provides. Similarly, in the Christian school we don't spend all of our time looking at the Son (Jesus Christ). Rather, we look at <u>everything else</u> in the light that the Son provides. This is our key distinctive.
6. Though a few examples of Islamic madrassa schools do raise the issue of religious bigotry and antisocial radicalization, research by the Cardus organization (2011 and 2014) and Buckingham's research in Australia (2010) clearly demonstrate that educational choice does not lead to the fracturing of society, but rather to more wholesome cultural awareness and interaction.
7. Echoing Paul's entreaty in Romans 12:2, Al Mohler (2015) implores Christians to be biblically faithful in their understanding of this issue as it applies to education:

> We don't believe in the possibility of the separation between secular and religious instruction, we actually don't. We don't believe that there can be a worldview distinction [in] which all of a sudden a teacher could say, 'okay I'm going to teach in a secular mode for 6 ½ hours and then I'm going to teach in a Jewish mode or the Christian mode for the other hour and a half.' The fact is that we are just not made that way. We can't separate ourselves into a secular and a Christian sphere. And if we're actually teaching, in terms of the Christian worldview, that's going to be something that will permeate every hour, every subject, every book, every essay, every conversation...If we are teaching from a Christian worldview that means we teach every subject from a Christian worldview, if we are teaching from Christian truth that means we apply Christian truth in every arena of thought. (Mohler, 2015)

CONCLUSION

Secularism is a powerful and persuasive religious force that dominates contemporary culture in an exclusivist and self-serving manner. In education and in other social realms, it is the established religion of Australia in the 21st century. It claims to not be opposed to Christianity or other religions, but in fact it is antithetical to a Christian worldview. Though secularism may well ultimately be the self-defeating, unsustainable detour that some describe (Smith, 2014, p.3), for the meantime at least, it is often unchallenged as the dominant, forcibly inflicted (under the guise of tolerance) religion of our age. Its belligerent impositions need to be clearly

understood and combatted by tolerant, peace-loving citizens of all religious persuasions who are concerned for freedom of expression and for the welfare of the nations in which they live. The "Freedom for Faith" gathering in Sydney in May 2018, organised by Christian jurists, was a laudable example of Christians taking a stand on this issue.

Secularism has as its primary goal the eradication of all other religious forces from the public domain other than itself. Through its enticing but false claim to neutrality, secularism has even entrapped many Christians who have failed to recognize the idolatrous nature of its worldview, and who, as Smith (2013, p.141) puts it, have been "unwittingly conscripted into [secularism's] stories that are rival tellings of what's in store for the world." As Edwards (2014) reminds us, Christian educators should re-examine their teacher training foundations and their consequential educational practice, to ensure that the beguiling attraction of state-endorsed secularism does not crush the hope and purpose of the all-of-life embracing gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our understanding of secularism as religion requires a gospel response that goes beyond passive acceptance of the status quo, something more energetic than a pre-emptive capitulation to mainstream public thought. A biblical concept of all of life's essential religious character, when seen in the light of Scripture's missional challenge to Christians to reach out into the culture and bring every thought into subjection to Jesus Christ (2 Cor 10:5), empowers Christ's hope-filled followers concerned about education, to winsomely draw attention to the public misconception about secularism. It also empowers Christians, for the sake of democratic pluralism, to join with adherents to other theistic and non-theistic faiths and call for a re-examination of secularism's special established status in mainstream education. And finally, it calls Christians in education, as reflective practitioners who want to be faithful to the biblical narrative in all that they do, to collaboratively explore and apply a Christian worldview in the classrooms of schools that have a distinctly Christian mission and purpose.

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[i] For an expansion of these comments, see chapter one in Edlin, (2014). *The cause of Christian education* (4th ed). Sioux Centre, IO: Dordt College Press.