

Religion in Schools: A Catholic Controversy, 1930-1934

FROM THE TIME that the first settlers began to set up schools, education in New Zealand was plagued by denominational rivalries. Each of the colonies had to pose and ultimately to answer certain questions: should schools be controlled by church or state? what part should religion play in education? what stance should the state take towards the schools maintained by religious denominations? These questions dominated the debates surrounding the 1877 Education Bill and coloured discussions of issues which on the surface had little to do with religion.¹ The result was that in 1877 New Zealand launched a state system of primary education that was completely secular and set itself firmly against granting government money to any school that was not part of this state system.

The churches were never completely satisfied with this solution. The Protestant churches tried year after year to secure amendments to the secular clause, and the Roman Catholics continued to press for financial aid for the school system they had set up.² The Protestants strongly opposed the Catholic claim, and the Catholic hierarchy fought vehemently against the Protestant attempts to have religious instruction given in state schools. The grounds on which the Roman Catholics opposed the Protestant plans were: (1) the government would supplant the church as the teacher of religion; (2) a new 'State School Religion' would be devised; (3) Catholics would be paying for the teaching of Protestantism; (4) there would be danger of proselytism.³ Again and again attempts to introduce religion into the schools were opposed by Catholic spokesmen using variants of these arguments. A remarkable consistency marked the Catholic attitude from 1877 until quite recently when, as part of improved relationships between the churches, the position altered. There was, however, one brief period in the early 1930s when this thread of consistency was stretched to an extraordinary degree and the ranks of the Catholic

¹ John Mackey. *The Making of a State Education System: The Passing of the New Zealand Education Act, 1877*, London, 1967.

² J. J. Small. 'Religion and the Schools in New Zealand 1877-1963', *Comparative Education Review*, IX, 1 (February 1965), 53-62.

³ I. A. Snook, 'An Interpretation of the Religion in Schools Issue, 1914', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1964, pp. 65-82.

hierarchy were divided more seriously than at any other time in New Zealand history. This dissension has consistently puzzled historians who have had to be content with recording it without being able to explain it. Breward, for example, remarked: 'It is hard to resist the conclusion that there were elements in the negotiations between the League and the hierarchy which were never made public.'⁴ A reasonably full account of the externals of the controversy along with extracts from the correspondence between the Bible in Schools League and the Catholic bishops is contained in Blamires,⁵ but the exact nature of the differences among the bishops remains a mystery. As Dr. Breward suggested, 'research needs to be done in Roman Catholic sources'.⁶

This paper is based on such research. It endeavours to throw light on the controversy by examining how it arose, and how it was resolved. It takes us behind the scenes and reveals something of the personalities of those most intimately involved in making the decisions on behalf of Catholicism — the archbishops and bishops of New Zealand.

In outline, the events which make up this episode are as follows. On 21 March 1930 the secretary of the Bible in Schools League wrote to Archbishop Redwood seeking a conference between the League and the hierarchy. The letter quoted the assurance of Bishop Cleary that Catholics would have no objection to religion in state schools provided that the consciences of teachers and children were respected.⁷ The letter also asked whether the League was correct in assuming that the state aid question was not an integral part of the issue.⁸

From this point, negotiations with the League were carried on by Archbishop O'Shea, co-adjutor Archbishop of Wellington, acting on behalf of Archbishop Redwood. O'Shea forwarded copies of the League's letter to the other three bishops of the New Zealand province, Bishop Brodie of Christchurch, Bishop Whyte of Dunedin, and Bishop Liston of Auckland.⁹ In his covering letter O'Shea told the bishops that the matter would be discussed at the annual meeting of the hierarchy.¹⁰

⁴ Ian Breward, *Godless Schools? A Study of Protestant Reactions to Secular Education in New Zealand*, Christchurch, 1967, p. 82.

⁵ E. O. Blamires, *A Christian Core for New Zealand Education*, Auckland, 1960, pp. 23-39.

⁶ Breward, p. 100.

⁷ Cleary had been bishop of Auckland until his death in 1929. For more than forty years he had been the Church's spokesman on education and had spearheaded all attacks on Protestant plans for religion in schools.

⁸ Blamires to Redwood, 21 March 1930. This letter and the other private correspondence cited in this paper are kept in the Roman Catholic Archives, Christchurch.

⁹ The archbishop who presides over a Province (in this case, New Zealand) is termed the Metropolitan. The other bishops in charge of dioceses within the Province are sometimes referred to as suffragan bishops. All, collectively, are called the hierarchy.

¹⁰ O'Shea to Brodie, 28 March 1930.

On 28 April 1930, the hierarchy met in Wellington and the following day they received a deputation from the League, Rev. E. D. Patchett, Rev. E. O. Blamires, Hon. Sir James Allen, Lieutenant-Colonel Studholme. After this conference the three bishops (Brodie, Whyte, Liston) went to Christchurch and held a meeting of their own. On 2 May Bishop Liston called on O'Shea and what transpired at this meeting is the crux of the subsequent dissension.

On 12 May O'Shea wrote to the League accepting their plan subject to legal advice on the effectiveness of the clauses safeguarding Catholic interests: 'The Catholic hierarchy hereby affirm their approval of the proposals and clauses as set out in the above letter [from Blamires] and discussed at our meeting.'¹¹

On 25 July 1930, the newspapers carried parallel statements by the League and Archbishop Redwood which indicated to the public that an agreement had been reached between the League and the Catholic Church.¹² Redwood's statement contained the assurance: 'If a Bill containing the exemptions and safeguards for the consciences of Catholics and of others already mentioned is introduced into Parliament it will not be opposed by us.'

The League then proceeded to draft a Bill along the lines suggested, confident that with Catholic opposition removed, the Bill would become law.

However, on 20 June 1931 (one year later) Bishop Brodie wrote to Blamires stating: 'As a member of the Catholic Hierarchy and having been a party to all negotiations between the Catholic Hierarchy and the Bible in Schools League, I wish to remind you that no agreement of any kind has been entered into by the two organisations mentioned.'¹³ On 24 June Brodie made his denial public.¹⁴

On 1 July 1931, Archbishop O'Shea wrote to the League re-confirming the original agreement and deprecating the statement by Bishop Brodie. On 10 July O'Shea released a statement to the press affirming the agreement and assuring the League that Catholic opposition to its proposals had been withdrawn.¹⁵

The Bill was introduced into the House of Representatives and referred to the Select Committee on Education. This Committee received a letter from the bishops (over the head of O'Shea) expressing the opposition of the hierarchy to the Bill. The Bill failed to pass the second reading.

On 14 October 1932, Archbishop Redwood released a statement to the press in which he joined the bishops in repudiating O'Shea. The official position was now that the Archbishop and the bishops of New Zealand were united in their opposition to the League while

¹¹ O'Shea to Blamires, 12 May 1930.

¹² Both statements are reproduced in Blamires, pp. 27-31.

¹³ Brodie to Blamires, 20 June 1931.

¹⁴ *Christchurch Times*, 24 June 1931.

¹⁵ Blamires, pp. 36-37.

O'Shea, the co-adjutor Archbishop of Wellington, was left out on a limb tenaciously sticking to what he regarded as a solemn agreement.

This, then, in outline is the series of events which has puzzled historians. The questions which have to be answered are these:

(1) Did the bishops originally agree to the proposals and subsequently change their minds or was O'Shea mistaken in maintaining this?

(2) What brought about Redwood's *volte face* between his statement of 25 July 1930, and that of 14 October 1932?

Throughout the controversy, O'Shea held to the view that when he called on him on 2 May 1930, Bishop Liston told him that the bishops had agreed to support the League's proposals, and on this basis he had proceeded to write to the League. Liston, however, denied that he had conveyed this message and the other bishops denied that they had authorized such a message. The minutes of the meeting of the hierarchy on 13 October 1931 are of interest here:

The minutes of the previous meeting of 29 April 1931, were read and confirmed with the addition of the following paragraph:

At the meeting of October 13th Archbishop O'Shea wished that in the above Minutes reference should be made to the fact that he had asked Dr. Liston why he had stated to him (Archbishop O'Shea) in an interview dated May 2nd 1930, that he was authorised by the two Southern Bishops to say that all three had withdrawn all further opposition to the agreement with the B.-in-S. League, provided certain conditions were fulfilled. Dr. Liston answered that this was not a correct statement of the position.¹⁶

Apparently Liston, who was the secretary for the meetings, had included no reference to the discussion of the conversation of 2 May between O'Shea and himself.

The minutes of this meeting also shed some light on Redwood's change of view:

His Grace Archbishop O'Shea brought up the question of the Bible-in-Schools and a long discussion took place, revealing a difference of opinion. His Grace Archbishop Redwood stated in the course of the discussion that he had been in favour of the Bible-in-Schools Bill until then, but had now changed his mind and decided to oppose it. The following motion put forward by the Bishop of Christchurch was finally adopted by His Grace Archbishop Redwood and Bishops Brodie, Whyte and Liston, His Grace Archbishop O'Shea dissenting and withdrawing from further consideration of the matter:

'That a joint statement in the name of the Hierarchy be issued by His Grace Archbishop Redwood; that no member of the Hierarchy have authority to appear before the Parliamentary Committee; that the Rt. Rev. Dr. Whyte be authorised to present the Statement to the Parliamentary Committee.'¹⁷

There remain, however, the tasks of determining why Redwood changed his mind and who was correct, Liston or O'Shea, as to what

¹⁶ Minutes of meeting of the hierarchy, 13 October 1931.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

took place on 2 May 1930.

In discussing the position of Archbishop Redwood, it must be remembered that he was the Metropolitan and O'Shea only his assistant, although with right of succession. We must also remember that in 1930, Redwood was 91 years of age and had instructed O'Shea to deputise for him in the matter. In the Catholic archives in Christchurch there is a typed document headed 'The Bible-in-Schools Question'. Although it is unsigned, it is a partisan account of the controversy and was probably compiled by O'Shea or by someone acting on his behalf. In this document are reproduced letters from Redwood to O'Shea while Redwood was in Australia. These are used to demonstrate that, contrary to what was implied in the statement of 14 October 1932, Redwood was well aware of the opposition of the bishops and yet continued his support for O'Shea and the Bill. Then suddenly at the meeting of 13 October 1931, he announced his change of mind.¹⁸

A letter from Brodie to Redwood dated 9 October 1931 is suggestive of an explanation of this change of mind. After welcoming the Archbishop back from Australia the letter turns to an eloquent appeal that he reconsider his attitude to the Bill. It brings to bear all forces to sway Redwood, from outright flattery — 'your name must ever stand in honour as the champion of Catholic education in this young land' — to the fearful suggestion that in approving the Bill, he might be fostering heresy.¹⁹ Brodie did not rest content with his letter. It appears that he was helped by Father P. J. Smyth, who 'was closely associated with Archbishop Redwood. He twice accompanied him to Europe and several times to Australia.'²⁰ A draft of a telegram in the Christchurch archives to 'Dear P. J.' was probably destined for Smyth. It begins: 'God bless you for your heroic efforts to unite our divided forces — I have wired [The Bishops of] Auckland and Dunedin asking them [to] assemble Tuesday [and am] urging you to defer Rotorua trip till after Wednesday.'²¹ The draft goes on to mention his (Brodie's) letter to Redwood (presumably the letter of 9 October 1931) and adds: 'I hope my letter will please his Grace and your efforts will do the rest.'

There can be little reasonable doubt that these messages, coupled with the adamant stand of all the bishops at the meeting, led Redwood to change his opinion and so leave O'Shea in a very weak position: a co-adjutor opposed by his own superior as well as by all the bishops of the Province. That O'Shea was wounded by this is clear from a letter he wrote to Redwood: 'You do not yet realise how grossly your suffragans have deceived you, nor the injustice which you did me at

¹⁸ 'The Bible-in-Schools Question', pp. 7-9.

¹⁹ Brodie to Redwood, 9 October 1931.

²⁰ *St. Patrick's High School Timaru: Silver Jubilee, 1938-1962*, Timaru, 1962, p. 13.

²¹ Draft, Brodie to P. J. [Smyth?], n.d.

their instigation, by publishing a false account of what took place during the negotiations with the Bible in Schools representatives, and that you are resolved not even to hear my side of the story. This is not like you.'²²

In attempting to uncover the facts about the controversy itself, we are forced to adopt one of two views. Either the bishops or some of them gave their approval and later retracted it or Archbishop O'Shea made a mistake on 2 May. The correct answer is difficult to determine but certain documentary evidence sheds some light. The problem can be stated in this way. If the suffragan bishops did not approve of the Bill at the outset, why did they not express their disapproval after the letter had been sent to Blamires or after the Redwood-League statements of 25 July 1930? Why did a year elapse before Brodie expressed his opposition publicly? Finally, if O'Shea erred about Liston's message, what message did Liston convey from the other bishops?

If the other view is considered, the difficulties are no less intractable. On 23 May 1930 O'Shea wrote to each of the bishops enclosing a draft of the proposed statement on behalf of the hierarchy and the League. Yet prior to this, on 12 May, O'Shea had written to the League indicating the support of the hierarchy for the Bill. The bishops argued that the chronology demonstrated that O'Shea was mistaken. He insisted that they had already given firm support for the principles underlying the Bill and yet subsequently had to seek their approval for what they termed a 'basic goodwill document'.

A letter from Brodie to Blamires, dated 9 June 1930, is significant. The Bishop said: 'As I understand His Grace, Archbishop O'Shea will reply on behalf of the hierarchy it will not be necessary to comment on the circular of which you sent me a copy.'²³ Blamires, writing from the League's viewpoint, takes this as conclusive evidence that O'Shea was speaking for the other bishops. But it indicates something quite different, for O'Shea had already replied to the League on 12 May and it is clear that Brodie was unaware of this letter. This gives credence to the claim of the bishops when submitting the case to Rome, that the three bishops were unaware of this letter for thirteen months and learned of it only when Blamires revealed it.²⁴ Since the League's case depends more on this letter than on the public statements of 25 July 1930, the bishops' ignorance of it gravely weakens the position of O'Shea. The same submissions assert that on 18 June 1930 O'Shea called on Brodie in Christchurch and Brodie made it clear that he was not in agreement with the League's proposals. O'Shea is alleged to have said: 'All we can say is that we are divided.'²⁵ The submissions make the point that O'Shea could have

²² O'Shea to Redwood, 8 November 1932.

²³ Blamires, *loc. cit.*

²⁴ Submissions of the suffragan bishops to the Apostolic Delegate, 3 February 1933.

²⁵ *ibid.*

effectively silenced Brodie by referring to the message conveyed by Bishop Liston on 2 May.

That Brodie was never happy with the proposals is verified by one of the League delegation at the conference. His evidence is cogent, for it was in the interests of the League to suggest that at one stage the bishops were unanimous whatever their later stand. In a letter to the editor of the *Christchurch Times* Dean O'Donnell suggested that John Studholme, a League delegate, knew that three bishops had opposed the proposals. Studholme replied: 'I know nothing of the kind. The only member of the hierarchy present at our conference on April 29, 1930, who gave me the impression of being opposed to the agreement was Bishop Brodie.'²⁶ It seems certain, therefore, that Bishop Brodie was consistent throughout. He opposed the proposals at the conference and re-iterated his objection to O'Shea on 18 June 1930, a fact which is verified in the typescript referred to previously as a 'partisan document' where under the above date there is an entry: '[O'Shea] called on Bp. Brodie who denied having authorised Bp. Liston.'²⁷

On 29 May 1930 Bishop Liston replied to Archbishop O'Shea who had forwarded the proposed statements of the League and the hierarchy. The Bishop of Auckland said:

I do not care at all about the form of the statement these people have submitted. I think it would be wholly inadvisable for us to be associated with them in any such statement. There was no suggestion of the statement taking any such form at our meeting in W'gton. . . . I note that apart from a mild appeal for goodwill and the clauses exempting our teachers and children they do not in their statement say a word to help our several claims; on the contrary our main claim is definitely brushed aside as apparently a thing to be ruled out of all consideration.

Yet my view is that the situation should be explored further and so I suggest that the Bishops should meet again in W'gton and come to some definite conclusions.²⁸

The tone of the letter is of cautious consideration of the proposals, yet in O'Shea's view these proposals had already been approved by the hierarchy.

Of Bishop Whyte's views, little can be discovered. A note on 20 June 1930 in the typescript 'The Bible-in-Schools Question' reads '[O'Shea] called on Bp. Whyte who agreed they must stand by promise'.²⁹ But what was this promise? Was it a promise to support the Bill, or was it the promise referred to by the League: 'The hierarchy undertook to send a written reply to the League's official proposals'?³⁰ If it is accepted that Bishop Whyte was unaware of the letter to Blamires, not much can be made of this alleged statement

²⁶ Letter, *Christchurch Times*, 14 July 1931.

²⁷ 'The Bible-in-Schools Question', p. 1.

²⁸ Liston to O'Shea, 29 May 1930.

²⁹ p. 1.

³⁰ *Bible-in-Schools. Negotiations with Roman Catholics*, leaflet issued by Bible in Schools League, c. 1932, p. 2.

for none of the participants claimed that the hierarchy had given any assurance of support at the conference.

The evidence, therefore, tends to suggest that the bishops did not come to any agreement regarding the content of the Bill and that the statement of 25 July was nothing more than a statement by Redwood, acting on the advice of his co-adjutor, Archbishop O'Shea.

Two queries still remain. Why did the bishops wait almost a year before dissociating themselves from this statement? What was the message conveyed to O'Shea on 2 May? In their submissions to Rome, the bishops answer the first question: 'The three Bishops were astounded to read in the papers on the morning of 25th July, 1930 a statement issued by Archbishop Redwood indicating readiness to accept the league's proposals. . . . It was learned that parliamentary legislation was not to come forward till the following year, so the Bishops allowed the matter to remain in abeyance until the annual meeting of the hierarchy in April 1931.'³¹ The minutes of this meeting are then quoted to show that the three bishops were not in favour of the statement and believed it should never have been issued without their having the opportunity of seeing it.

Regarding the message of 2 May, Liston's position was that he had told O'Shea that 'if the League was prepared to issue the goodwill statement (on its own, of course) and to help us in the matter of such things as Bus Transport for our Catholic children, Dental Clinics and do at least something for securing Grants for our schools, then the bishops would be *prepared to consider* the League's proposal, namely, that the Bishops should stand aside whilst the League got from Parliament what it wanted. Just that and nothing more.'³² The position adopted by Liston here tallies quite well with his letter to O'Shea of 29 May 1930.³³

On 14 October 1932, while the Bill was before the Legislative Council, Archbishop Redwood released a statement making the position clear. He explained that the hierarchy consisted of himself and the bishops of Christchurch, Dunedin, and Auckland.³⁴ In the strict canonical sense this was so: a co-adjutor has no jurisdiction. Yet it seems an unkind treatment of O'Shea who was an important church official and had been appointed to negotiate with the League. The statement also suggests that O'Shea had acted throughout without

³¹ Submissions of the suffragan bishops to the Apostolic Delegate, 3 February 1933.

³² *ibid.*

³³ See above.

³⁴ *Evening Post*, Wellington, 14 October 1932. The statement was very important from the viewpoint of the hierarchy because, on the previous day (13 October) the Hon. Sir James Allen had stated in the Council that 'a majority of the Catholic hierarchy was in favour of the measure'. *Press*, Christchurch, 13 October 1932. This remark drew the public statement and a reply from Bishop Liston in which he pointed out that contrary to League statements, the hierarchy were opposed to the Bill and had given no promises of support. *Press*, 15 October 1932.

the approval of the other bishops. It appears that the hierarchy had to extricate themselves from a difficult position and in view of O'Shea's adamant stand they found it necessary to sacrifice him for the sake of unity.

The account given vindicates the suffragan bishops. Yet there persists a feeling that their stand was not completely consistent. Their readiness to meet the League half-way, to conciliate and compromise hardened into unyielding opposition to the League's proposals. Bishop Brodie, the senior of the suffragan bishops, seems to have taken it upon himself to rally the opposition: the meeting of the bishops was held in his diocese, he was the first to publicly repudiate the agreement, one of his clergy (Dean O'Donnell) engaged in a newspaper correspondence with Colonel Studholme, and Brodie wrote the letter which helped change Redwood's mind. A letter to Father Smyth dated 21 October 1932, suggests that Redwood should not engage in further discussion since the statement (of 14 October) was sufficient.³⁵

For the sake of completeness, it is fitting to indicate how the controversy finally ended. On 3 February 1933, the bishops submitted the case to Rome through the Apostolic Delegate in Sydney. A covering letter indicates that O'Shea was still adamant and that despite three meetings of the hierarchy 'the breach [was] wider than ever'.³⁶ Correspondence between the Delegate and Bishop Brodie continued throughout April but it reveals nothing of significance. A letter from the Delegate of 17 March 1934 begins: 'I have received your letter of the 8th instant notifying me of the complete restoration of harmony among the hierarchy on the Bible-in-Schools question'.³⁷ How this restoration was achieved cannot be determined but it is likely that in view of Redwood's advanced age (he died in January 1935), O'Shea realized that his own position as Metropolitan when he succeeded him would be intolerable if the rift between himself and the bishops persisted.

And so the Catholic hierarchy survived a crisis, the state schools of New Zealand remained secular, the Christian churches remained suspicious enemies, and the Bible-in-Schools movement disappeared from sight, to re-emerge later as a more liberal body, the Council for Christian Education. It was left to another age to launch the ecumenical movement and vindicate Archbishop O'Shea's basic stand of tolerance and goodwill.

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³⁵ Brodie to Smyth, 21 October 1932.

³⁶ Brodie to Apostolic Delegate, 3 February 1933.

³⁷ Delegate to Brodie, 17 March 1934.

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