

# CHRISTIANITY, NEUTRALITY AND PUBLIC SCHOOLING: THE ORIGINS OF THE DUTCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, 1801–1920

*Cristianismo, neutralidad y escuela pública: los orígenes del sistema educativo holandés, 1801–1920*

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**INTRODUCTION.** In the Netherlands, the first national law on education dates back to 1801. It laid the foundation for a system of public education that was accessible to children of all denominations: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. The identity of public schools was based on general Christian principles, while the teaching of religious doctrines was a task for religious organisations. But in time the interpretation of the legal objective for public education has changed. **METHOD.** In this article we follow the discussion about this objective and its translation into educational practice in the period 1801-1920. We use primary and secondary sources from the period under study. **RESULTS.** In the first decades of the 19th Century, the system was criticised by orthodox Protestant and Catholic groups that were unhappy with the pedagogical practice of public schools, being not Protestant enough on one side, and too Protestant on the other. Politically this matter was resolved with the Constitution of 1848 in which the principle of freedom of education was laid down. In the following years, private-denominational schools slowly became part of the Dutch educational system, but their number increased substantially after the new Constitution of 1920 that provided equal financial support for private-denominational and public schools. During this process of denominational privatisation of the educational system, the public schools lost their majority position, while their pedagogical practices turned towards religious and political neutrality. **DISCUSSION.** All this resulted in a remarkable fact: nowadays the Netherlands have an educational system with the smallest percentage of public schools in the world and the highest percentage of private-denominational schools.

**Key words:** *Educational systems, History of Education, Neutrality, Primary Education, The Netherlands.*

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## **The Batavian Revolution and the first laws on education**

As in 1795 French armies with the support of Dutch patriots attacked the country, the regional autonomy which was so characteristic for the Dutch Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (that in 1581 declared its independence from the Spanish Empire) was over (Israel, 2001). With the foundation of the Batavian Republic, the Netherlands became a nation state. In 1798, a first Constitution was introduced, and in 1801 the first law on education for the entire country saw the light. The ideal was to arrange for people's education at one single general public school (Boekholt, 2000: 5). The first Minister of Education supervised together with a range of national school inspectors the implementation of the aforementioned law on education (Dodde, 2001). Public education became "the subject of continuous care" for the Government. The revolution also implied breaking up the ties between the State and the Protestant Church (that during the Eighty Years' War with the Spanish Empire became the dominant religion in the Northern provinces of the Netherlands). In line with that, the new Minister of Education would have to exclude doctrinal education from public schools.

It was the second Minister of national education, Van der Palm, who together with clerk Van den Ende would formulate the first nationwide applicable law on education (Los, 2012). In this law of 1801 was established that for "all the doctrinal that is understood differently by the various denominations" there would be no place at public schools (Hoorn, 1907: 89). In a regulation pertaining to the law, the option was indeed left open to welcome the children "outside regular school hours to the 'Religious doctrines of the denomination they belong to'" (Hoorn, 1907: 128). The character of public education was established in Article 4 of the law, in which the ethical-reasonable meaning of public education was emphasised.

In 1803, a second law on education was introduced, which in turn was already replaced in 1806,

but the latter would remain in place for over half a century. The regulations of 1806 consisted—apart from the law— of a general regulation, decrees on the exams, and an instruction for school supervisors. The objective for public education was included in the general regulation (Article 22). It read as follows: "All education at school shall be carried out in such manner that by learning suitable and useful skills the intellectual capacities of the children shall be developed and they themselves are educated on all social and Christian virtues" (Hoorn, 1907: 162). From then on, said virtues would occur in legal stipulations in which the objective for public education was established. It was only the Dutch Primary Education Act of 1981 that defined a new foundation for public education, with which active pluralism was chosen as principle for the public school—an approach that would fit in better with the multi-cultural character of Dutch society than the passive neutrality that had become characteristic for the pedagogical practice at the public school of the 20th century (Braster, 2006).

From the fact that almost for two centuries in the legal objective for public education a reference was made to the same virtues may not be construed that the character of public education did not change throughout the years. On the contrary. This goal was discussed at various instances, involving both Government and Parliament as well as various educational organisations. This resulted in diverse interpretations of the same legal texts. In school practice the legal objective was interpreted in various ways as well. Not infrequently there was a gap between law and reality. The legal goal of public education, the discussion on it, and the interpretation of it in school practice will be at the centre point of this article.

## **The "social and Christian virtues" of 1806**

In the educational legislation of 1806, the social virtues preceded the Christian ones. From that order one might deduct that at the beginning of

the nineteenth century the State prevailed above the Church. Whether the order was that important at the time remains to be seen (Noordam, 1966: 292). The order can be understood better by referring to the opinion that the care for public education at first rests with the State “since the Church must be regarded as in a State, and not the other way round the State inside the Church; since in the State legal obligations apply and in the Church moral obligations, above the latter of which in this world the prior prevail” (Ende, 1846: 157).

Determining for the character of public education was —apart from the formal goal of public education— a legal text that in later years would be referred to as the “neutrality” stipulation. It read as follows: “Whereas measures are established in order to not deprive by any means the school children from the education in the doctrine of the denomination they belong to, the teaching of this education shall not take place by the master” (Hoorn, 1907: 225). It was furthermore established that no learning or reading books may be used than those that were listed on a general reading list as formulated by the State Secretary of Internal Affairs in 1810. Article 6 of the “General school order” was defining as well: “School time shall —be it weekly or daily— be opened and closed with a short and suitable Christian prayer in a respectful manner, and during those occasions something suitable may be sung as well” (Hoorn, 1907: 252). The “Christian-moral and religious meaning” of the 1806 legislation furthermore appeared from the Articles 8 and 11 of the decrees on the exams (Ende, 1846: 45). Prior to the exam, the teacher was investigated on his “Moral and religious school of thought and principles”; during the exam, questions should also be asked “particularly on the suitable means to educate the school children on the implementation of Christian virtues” (Ende, 1846: 98). Including these stipulations could be regarded as an expression of the idea that the main objective of education could only be achieved if one focused on the teacher.

Excluding doctrinal education, which in practice meant no longer being permitted to use the Heidelberg Catechism as prescribed by the Dordrecht Synod of 1618 en 1619, was a clear breach with the past. Yet, in practice the old “Church of the State” retained a lot of its influence on education. State school supervision would for instance mainly consist of (free-thinking) clergymen, and as was usual in the old Republic, the profession of teacher was often combined with a (paid) Church position (Boekholt, 1978: 24). Apart from that, education in the old Republic did not everywhere have a strict doctrinal character. Practice was often less orthodox than intended.

In many regards the revolution of 1795 —that introduced a central government and centralised rules, including the French principles Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood— can therefore not be considered as a breach between the old and the new Republic (Leune, 2000). In practice there was no division between religion and the State (Noordam, 1981: 143). The Government also did not object to doctrinal education “outside of normal school hours”. On the contrary: in 1806 Van den Ende sent circulars addressed to all churches, with the request to take over doctrinal education, whereas the historical and moral part of Christian religion would be arranged for at school (Meylink, 1857: 125). These circulars also emphasised that the objective of the educational legislation of 1806 was to prevent “the increasing immorality in our fatherland” and that could not be achieved with the then current practice of having the children learn the catechist learning book by heart (Ende, 1846: 216-217).

Although the Bible was not listed on the general reading list, Van den Ende did not exclude the use thereof at school, as appears from the explanation on the reading list. It was deemed self-evident that the teachers made use of the Bible “at regular intervals or during suitable occasions” (Eck, 1938: 10). The reservations against the use of the Bible were mainly of a

psychological-didactical nature. Van den Ende asked himself whether the Bible was indeed suited as a school book. At least one should take “the susceptibility and the age of the children” into account (Ende, 1803: 127). But the *exclusion* of Bible education was not requested. According to Van den Ende, that would mean that “the higher objective of the law on education, people’s education, Christian people’s education, would equally be destroyed for all pupils of those schools” (Ende, 1846: 89).

### **The adversaries of the general-Christian public school**

After the emergence of the Kingdom of the Netherlands under King William I, the law on education of 1806 remained in force. Closing off the Batavian-French era did indeed mean that in 1814 a new Constitution was established which was already modified the next year after the union with Belgium. A constitutional committee established the goal of public education in the 1815 Constitution as follows: “Public education is a continuous cause of care for the Government. The King shall annually provide the States General with an extensive report on the situation of the high, intermediate, and primary schools” (Hoorn, 1907: 296). Under pressure of Belgian members of the committee, the motive for this care —“promotion of religion”, as included in the 1814 Constitution— was no longer mentioned.

During the period 1795-1815, there were signs that not everyone in the Netherlands was satisfied with the educational modernisations that were advocated by the Government, free-thinking clergymen-school-supervisors, leaders of the Protestant Church, and representatives of the Dutch Society for Public Welfare (Boekholt and De Booy, 1987: 132). This small elite group found itself confronted with a group of parents that was attached to the old popular belief and that did not hold a non-doctrinal character of the school or the introduction of new learning

and readings books in high esteem. The Roman-Catholic Church, during this period still weakly organised, could in principle agree with the non-doctrinal and general-Christian character of public school. During the period 1815-1857, the dissatisfaction of some with the general-Christian public school gradually became more apparent. Already before 1857 we can notice a school-funding controversy, although with the remark that this was limited to verbal skirmishes between the elite groups of the various religious denominations (Bruin, 1985: 261). Furthermore, the school-funding controversy largely passed by the parents. That was not surprising. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Netherlands were a poor country where by far not all children were sent to school, and where child labour was more a rule of thumb than an exception (Braster and Dodde, 1994: 21-35). In the detailed reports by school supervisor Weinbeek on the functioning of the Dutch education system we encountered little data that indicate openly resistance of parents. Potential tensions with regard to the contents of education, namely reading the Bible, the disappearance of the Catechism, the singing, the new educational methods, and national history seldom resulted in insolvable conflicts. If necessary, the general-Christian public school adapted to the colour of the local environment like a chameleon. In other words: there were also Protestant-Christian and Roman-Catholic public schools. In mixed areas, solutions were found at school level that did justice to the religious proportions (Bruin, 1976: 258). In Dutch Reformed provinces such as Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, and Zeeland, and in Roman-Catholic provinces such as Noord-Brabant and Limburg, at least three quarters of the total of schools consisted of public educational institutions. For the said provinces also applied that the share of the confessional-special schools remained limited. This data coincide with the idea of a general-Christian public school that adapts itself to a predominantly Protestant and/or Roman-Catholic environment.

The resistance against the character of public education as it was established in the law of 1806 was mainly initiated by two numerically small movements: the orthodox-Protestant and the Ultramontane Catholics which both —albeit for differing reasons— were not satisfied with the Protestant nature of public schools. A not inconsiderable part of the orthodox-Protestant group was united in the Dutch Reformed Church. However, they did not belong to the mainstream of this denomination. The dominant part of Dutch protestantism was under the movement of the Groningen professor and school supervisor P. Hofstede de Groot. This so-called Groningen movement set itself up as the defendant of the general-Christian and for everyone accessible public school of 1806. Education should not have a doctrinal character. It was considered more important to show —with Jesus as an example— “who mankind is, should be and can become” (Kalsbeek, Lens, and Meijnen, 1907: 17). The orthodox-Protestant remained —contrary to the Groningen movement— holding on to the formulation of unity, the Dutch confession of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the decisions of the Dordrecht Synod. Their pursuit was focused on restoring public school with the old doctrinal character from before 1795.

The orthodox-Protestant movement within the Dutch Reformed Church was no homogeneous group however. There was a difference between the confessional movement —with G. Groen van Prinsterer as their foreman— and the ethnical-irenic movement, whereto the future Minister J.J.L. van der Brugghen should be counted. The first group assumed a state that rested on the Protestant confession of faith, whereas the second group was of the opinion that the state should take up a neutral position in relation to all denominations. The first group also pursued a revitalisation of the Protestant character of public school, whereas the second group was of the opinion that public school should take up a neutral position towards religion. Apart from the two orthodox-Protestant

groups mentioned, which remained part of the Reformed Church, there was a group of orthodox believers that segregated in 1834 from the Reformed Church: the secessionists.

Criticism was also heard from the Ultramontanes. After the official separation between the Netherlands and Belgium in 1839, the Ultramontane influence on educational politics gained momentum. They fought in order to “de-Protestantise” the “anti-Catholic” public school and for the freedom to found an own Roman-Catholic school. Therewith the Ultramontanes differed from the orthodox-Protestants that mainly regarded the freedom of education as “a monopolist freedom of the Calvinist or Reformed Church to be reformed in the full educational field” (Bruin, 1985: 218). Groen van Prinsterer for instance opted in 1841 for a “reformed” public denomination school that could be split up into a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jewish public school or —when keeping the mixed public school in place— for “separate education for Protestants and Catholics [...] in those topics on which various concepts of faith is almost inevitably of influence” (Langedijk, 1947: 24).

### **The Constitution of 1848: freedom and respect**

After the final breach with Belgium in 1839, the Government was compelled to modify the 1815 Constitution. One year later there was a new Constitution, but that still brought no change to its article about education. However, that modification seemed to be inevitable. As a result of consistent complaints from the Roman-Catholic side on the Protestant character of public school, the King in that very same year instated a State Committee. The advice of the Committee resulted in the Royal Decree of 2 January 1842. Interesting at that was Article 10 which obliged teachers of primary schools to provide written statements on all books, songs, and writings they made use of as

teachers, if the representatives of the various religious denominations in their city or town requested so. Clergymen could ban books or have passages in books made unreadable. Article 2 of the Decree was of importance as well, since it established that the composition of the provincial school supervisory boards must be brought in tune with the religious proportions within a province. An understandable decision —since the school supervision was dominated by free-thinking and innovative former clergymen. At the appointment of new teachers, a similar criterion applied. It furthermore remained “strictly forbidden” to “express any explanation or use an expression because of which one or the other denomination could feel offended” at public school.

The Royal Decree of 1842 met with enthusiasm in the Roman-Catholic South, but the orthodox-Protestants were less happy with it, since the Decree would result in watering down the Protestant-Christian character of public school. Some orthodox-Protestants therefore started to argue the foundation of their own schools —a desire that the Roman-Catholics had already expressed earlier. The option to found special schools already exists, but with the exception of a few, the scarce attempts to found special confessional schools failed until then because of the unwillingness of local authorities. The Royal Decree of 1842 brought some improvement, since in case of a refusal of the necessary permit a petition to the Provincial Executive become possible.

Freedom of education would finally be included in a new Constitution in 1848. This was mainly thanks to the efforts of the liberal faction that acquired Governmental power in that year. In 1844, nine liberals including Thorbecke —the statesman that would become the later prime minister— filed a proposal for revision of the Constitution. The following stipulation should be included in its article about education: “The organisation of public education shall be arranged by the law, with due respect

of everyone’s religious concepts”. Thorbecke regarded the inclusion of the “respect” stipulation as a necessary repetition of what was already written in the Constitution of 1815: “The absolute liberty of religious concepts is guaranteed to everyone” (Bolkestein, 1939: 27-28). A public discussion of the proposal did not make it, however. The draft for the article about education in the Constitution that was proposed by the State Committee of 1848, in which Thorbecke was once again represented, met a different fate. The proposal of the Committee once again mentioned the “respect” stipulation of 1844, whereas it also established: “Giving education is free, except for the survey into the skills of teachers and the supervision by the authorities, both to be regulated by law” (Hoorn, 1907: 327-328). The liberal Government adopted the basic ideas of this draft. The modifications were related to the article last mentioned, to which was added: “except for the supervision by the authorities, and furthermore in as far as it concerns intermediate and primary education, except for the survey into the skills and morals of teachers, to be arranged by the law” (Hoorn, 1907: 327-328).

The majority of Parliament indeed wanted to accept the freedom of education, but only if a number of conditions had been met. Pressure was exerted to preserve the sentence dating back to 1815: “Public education is a subject of continuous care for the Government” (Hoorn, 1907: 296). The Government should keep focussing all its attention on public primary schools in order to thus diminish the possible negative influence that would arise from the special schools to be founded. The Parliament therefore demanded an extra stipulation in the constitutional article about education as well, in which was established “that in each municipality, without distinction, the authorities shall provide sufficient public primary education” (Diepenhorst, 1927: 62). The Government subsequently let it be known not to object to once again including the phrase on “the continuous care”. It furthermore agreed to the inclusion

of a new section, which read: "Everywhere in the Kingdom the Government shall provided sufficient public primary education" (Hoorn, 1907: 327).

With this stipulation was established that public education took in a dominant position in the educational field, and that a quantitative increase of special education would not be able to threaten this position. Indeed that was not really necessary. Nevertheless, the main objections to a modification of the constitutional article were now from the table, and the education paragraph was passed in both Houses with only a few votes against it. The freedom of education so dearly wanted by the Roman-Catholics therewith became a fact. The liberals in their turn had succeeded to decrease the concentration of power with the national Government and to lay the primary responsibility with the lower authorities and individual citizens (Boekholt and Booy, 1987: 144). From the way the education article was discussed in Parliament can be deducted that the legislator certainly did not envision a non-religious public school. The constitutional command was more aimed against a certain way of discussion than against the introduction of certain topics (Buys, 1887: 772). However, not everyone agreed with such interpretation of the "respect" principle. This appeared when the constitutional article had to be translated into a new law on primary education.

The proponents of the principles of the law of 1806, including the Dutch Teachers' Association founded in 1842, initially were strongly against the freedom of education, but finally had no reasons to be dissatisfied with the new Constitution. Especially the Association, under the direction of its chairman Hofstede de Groot, saw opportunities to have various guarantees for public education included in the Constitution (Boer and Heinsius, 1892: 27). Those guarantees concerned "the continuous care" for public education and the "omnipresence" thereof, whereas also the survey into the

"morality" of the teacher was added to the constitutional article at the advice of the Association. Other organisations that advocated public education also addressed the Government and parliament with written requests. The attempts of influencing finally had the intended effect. Public education would not be threatened by the freedom of education, whereas the general-Christian character of the public school would be maintained.

### **The "Christian and social virtues" of 1857**

The acceptance of the Constitution of 1848 meant that the law on education of 1806 had to be replaced. The first attempt was made by a liberal Minister in 1849. But it would take until 1855 before draft legislation was on the table that could count on the support of a majority in Parliament. Education was "made in service of the enhancement of morality and religion" and *relative neutrality* was introduced: the teachers should refrain "from educating, doing or not doing something that is harmful for the religious concepts of the denomination or denominations whereto the school-going children belong" (Koksma, 1888: 20). In a previous draft, *absolute neutrality* was still mentioned: the teacher was not permitted to harm any religious group, whereby it did not matter whether or not children of such group were present at school. In the latter draft, the presence of certain religious denominations at school proved to be decisive. The law therewith closely connected with practice.

The draft law of 1855 would have been accepted, had the King not refused to sign the law. He decided to this move when in 1856 part of the orthodox-Protestant population expressed its complaints against the law on education, out of fear for a "de-Protestantisation" of public education. In the same year, the powers of Government fell into the hands of the aforementioned Van der Brugghen. For the first time

an orthodox-Protestant Minister entered the “battlefield”. Contrary to Groen van Prinsterer, he did not opt for the re-profiling of the Protestant character of public education, but for the freedom to found private-denominational schools. Fully in line with the principle, it was established in a draft law on primary education that, if “the children are withheld from visiting public school by virtue of religious objections from the parents” there should be an option to found private-denominational schools. The State should thereby aid by means of providing subsidy. In accordance with the desires of the proponents of the general-Christian public school, Article 21 of the draft also included that public education should be at the service of “the development of the mental capacities of the children as well as of their education to all Christian and social virtues”. The teacher should once again refrain from “teaching, doing or not doing something which is in violation of the respect due to the religious concepts of dissentients”. The law also discussed the impression of that respect and exciting “mutual love and tolerance”. The “education in religion” was left to the religious denominations that could thereto have the classrooms at their disposal “outside school hours”. Article 16 of the draft established that in each municipality a “sufficient amount of school, accessible to all children, without distinction of religious conviction” should be available.

The draft clearly had the nature of a compromise. The objective was to satisfy both the majority and the minority. The possible provision of state subsidy to private-denominational schools with which one tried to meet the objections of the minority did not have a chance, though. This idea was rejected unanimously. Also the addition to the “respect” stipulation in which the “impression of respect” was discussed, was considered to be too strong and rejected. In order to assure the majority that the public school of 1857 was founded on the same principles as that of 1806 and therewith remained accessible for children of all religious

faiths, the Government maintained the stipulation in which a reference was made to the “Christian and social virtues”. However, this did not mean that one should interpret those “virtues” in the same way as in 1806 (Dodde, 1983: 44). One should not attach too much value to the fact that the “Christian virtues” preceded the “social” ones in 1857. The “virtues” of 1857 have a more secularised focus than a religious-Christian meaning as it did in 1806. Van der Bruggen himself stated in 1860 that the education of Christian virtues of 1806 should be regarded as an “education into Christianity”. According to him, the law of 1806 prescribed “religious education, neutralised Christianity”. At the state school of 1857 “no religious education, in whichever form, shall be educated” (Tweede Kamer, 1860). That is a task for the Church where the State should stay out of.

The law of 1857 brought along that the public school should act more reservedly towards religion and ideology than was intended in 1806. But Van der Bruggen never opted for absolute neutrality or for a non-religious school, as Groen van Prinsterer reproached him. In fact, he appealed for positive neutrality. On the “respect” stipulation he made the following remark in 1857: “Irritation is not incited by the presence of appearances, testimonies, or signs that the Dutch nation is one to a greater or lesser extent infected with the leaven of the Gospel. [...] But it is irritation and non-respect, in a harmful manner, with disdain, to speak in the presence of others on their religious conviction; it is placing another conviction as a better one in their presence” (Tweede Kamer, 1857, Appendices: 1114). Thereby the teacher was in the centre point: “With the influence of the teacher—even if he only acts as silent witness— Van der Bruggen deems a mixed school possible that may carry the name Christian, because of the atmosphere it creates” (Kohnstamm, n.d.: 26). However, it remains very much to be seen whether Van der Bruggen could clarify this all in 1857.



Clear was indeed that after 1857 —the law was passed that year with 47 aye votes and 13 votes against— the neutrality principle obtained a more negative content than was intended (Oosterlee, 1929: 176).

### **The law on education of 1857 in practice**

With the introduction of the law on education of 1857, the general-Christian character of public school did not yet make way for a neutral attitude towards religion and ideology. Many public schools would pervade an obedient atmosphere for decades to come. After 1857, at school still the children's rhymes of the Dutch poet Van Alphen (1746-1803) were read, whereas all sorts of moralist books —such as the *Moral reading book* published by the Dutch Society for Public Welfare— were used for a long time (Jansen, 1869). After 1880, popular books about virtuous boys and girls were considered to be dull, but therewith virtue as an ideal did not disappear. The integration of virtues became more important than imposing virtues (Bakker, 1995; Bakker, Noordman and Rietveld-Van Wingerden, 2010).

After 1857, public school still performing the chameleon model and absorbed the colour of its environment (Bruin, 1976: 246-278). In many villages and towns, public school focused on the Church tradition that prevailed in a certain region. By means of this strategy, the local needs were satisfied, because of which possible conflicts with parents were prevented. Given such strategy, it could happen that at some public school reading and explaining from the Bible was still practised, whereas strictly seen this was not permitted. Even when Jewish pupils attended a school, it could happen that the Bible was used. The New Testament was then discussed by the teacher on Saturdays, when the Jewish children celebrated Sabbath. There are also cases known whereby the Bible was introduced to a public school in order to

prevent the foundation of a special school. Furthermore it regularly happened —with the approval of the school supervisors— that the school began or ended with a prayer (Feikema, 1929: 98).

A strategy based on adaptation to local circumstances not only occurred in Protestant regions, but was as much used in the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg where until the beginning of the twentieth century many public schools were characterised by a Roman-Catholic atmosphere (Buys, 1889: 298). In view of that, it is not surprising that in the decades before the financial equation of 1920 —the year in which private-denominational schools got the same subsidy from the State as public schools—, in the South of the Netherlands the number of confessional schools compared to other parts of the country has always been extremely low (Kruithof, Noordman, and De Rooy, 1982). Within this context it is also meaningful that the six Catholic Members of Parliament that voted in favour of the law of 1857 originate from the South of the Netherlands, whereas the other six Catholic Members of Parliament from the North of the Netherlands voted against the bill. It can be assumed that the people from the South were aware of the relative nature of neutrality of public education. For that matter, the expected national growth of the amount of special schools lagged behind the expectations after the granting of freedom of education. In 1858, only 13 Christian schools were built, in 1859 no more than six, and in 1860 we note the modest amount of 11. The proponents of a Christian school did not hide their disappointment thereof. Groen van Prinsterer spoke of “a dreadful situation of disinterest” and of “apathy, discouragement, unawareness with the state of the question” (Langedijk, 1953: 127). Apparently, the need of the people was not as high as was announced in Parliament. Public school remained an acceptable education institution for many parents. Furthermore, it was also the school where most of them attended their

own education. The decline of the percentage of pupils that visited a public school over the period 1857-1876 was therefore modest: down from 79 to 75 percent.

### **Towards a neutral public school**

With the introduction of the Dutch Primary Education Act of 1857, the combat on the character of the public school ceased to be. The general-Christian character of public education gradually made room for a more neutral position. The new Dutch Primary Education Act of 1878 by the liberal Kappayne van de Coppello emphasised the interpretation of the public state school as a neutral, but not immoral educational institution, where a Christian atmosphere reigned and where doctrinal education—from 1878 onwards during school hours—could be given by religion teachers of the respective denominations. The legal goal of public education would not change. An amendment from the orthodox-Protestant wing to subsequently only mention social virtues was rejected with 53 votes against 28. The main issue of discussion was no longer the character of the public school, but the provision of subsidies to special schools. It was the confessional coalition Cabinet Mackay that enabled partial subsidising of private-denominational education in the Dutch Primary Education Act of 1889. Finally, the confessional parties won the battle on subsidising private-denominational education. The financial equation was established in the new Constitution of 1917, and some years later in the Primary Education Act of 1920.

The objective of public education remained almost unchanged in this Act. The article that was under discussion on 12 May 1920 in the Lower House still contained the passages which referred to the “education in all Christian and social virtues” and the “respect due to the religious concepts of dissentients”. Socialist Lower House Member Ossendorp did indeed file an amendment whereby public teachers

were instructed to refrain from teaching something that was in violation with the respect due to the religious *and political* concepts of dissentients. As chairman of the Federation of Dutch Teachers, Ossendorp already defended absolute neutrality of public education since 1910, which meant for school practice that no mention should be made of the correct religion or the correct political constellation, namely monarchy or republic. The amendment Ossendorp c.s. was rejected with 51 against 24 votes. A second amendment, files by the communist Van Ravesteijn, intended to replace the words “Christian and social virtues” with the text “social virtues”. Finally, this amendment was rejected with 73 votes against, and only 2 in favour. The legal goal for public education was subsequently accepted without roll-call.

### **Conclusion**

With the introduction of the Dutch Primary Education Act of 1920, a new basis for the Dutch educational field was laid: on the one hand, there is the public school with a neutral character governed by the authorities accessible to any student, and on the other hand the equally financed private-denominational school governed by a private law institution and based on a freely chosen religious or ideological principle with the freedom to select teaching materials, teachers, and pupils pertaining thereto. Although the educational legislation of 1920 is indicated as educational pacification, the discussion on the position of public education has not yet been concluded. This is in line with the view of the declining share in terms of percentage of public primary education. In 1910 we register 62 percent, in 1930 45 percent, in 1950 34 percent, and in 2000 33 percent. The discussion on the character of public education would not die down either. Already by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century people advocated a more positive interpretation of the neutrality of public education (Gerhard and Kohnstamm, 1923). The search for a new moral foundation

for the public school continued after the Second World War. Finally, the ideas come down to a pursuit for active pluralism. A concrete elaboration thereof was the new goal for public education as included in the Primary Education Act of 1981. In stead of Christian and social virtues, the Act referred to “the development of the pupils with attention for ideological and

social values as they are present in Dutch society, and with acknowledgment of the meaning of the diversity of those values”. The realisation that this objective is not always achieved in practice is a different story (Braster, 1996). But the fact that public school in practice in many cases still adapts itself to the environment like a chameleon is a story with a long history.

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## Resumen

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### *Cristianismo, neutralidad y escuela pública: los orígenes del sistema educativo holandés, 1801-1920*

**INTRODUCCIÓN.** En Holanda, la primera ley nacional de educación se remonta a 1801. Sentó las bases para un sistema de educación pública accesible para los niños de todas las confesiones religiosas: protestantes, católicos y judíos. La identidad de las escuelas públicas se fundamentaba en los principios generales cristianos, mientras que la enseñanza de las doctrinas religiosas era una tarea de las organizaciones religiosas. Pero con el tiempo la interpretación de la finalidad de la educación pública en la legislación holandesa ha cambiado. **MÉTODO.** En este artículo se analiza la discusión sobre dicha finalidad y su traducción en la práctica educativa en el periodo 1801-1920. Utilizamos fuentes primarias y secundarias de la época estudiada. **RESULTADOS.** En las primeras décadas del siglo XIX el sistema fue criticado por los grupos ortodoxos de protestantes y católicos, quienes estaban descontentos con la práctica pedagógica de las escuelas públicas; los unos porque consideraban que no era suficientemente protestante, los otros porque les parecía excesivamente protestante. Esta

cuestión se resolvió políticamente con la Constitución de 1848, en la cual se estableció el principio de libertad de enseñanza. En los años siguientes las escuelas confesionales comenzaron lentamente a formar parte del sistema educativo holandés, pero su número creció sustancialmente tras la nueva Constitución de 1920, que proporcionó un apoyo financiero similar para las escuelas públicas y las privadas confesionales. Durante este proceso de privatización del sector confesional del sistema educativo, las escuelas públicas perdieron su posición mayoritaria, mientras que sus prácticas pedagógicas se orientaron hacia la neutralidad religiosa y política. **DISCUSIÓN.** Todo ello resultó en un hecho destacable: en la actualidad Holanda tiene el sistema educativo con el porcentaje más reducido de escuelas públicas en el mundo y el porcentaje más elevado de escuelas confesionales.

**Palabras clave:** *Sistemas educativos, historia de la educación, neutralidad, educación primaria, Países Bajos.*

## **Résumé**

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### *Christianisme, Neutralité et Scolarisation Publique : les Origines du Système Éducatif aux Pays-Bas, 1801-1920*

**INTRODUCTION.** Aux Pays-Bas, la première loi nationale d'éducation remonte à 1801. Elle pose la base pour un système d'éducation publique accessible aux enfants de toutes les dénominations : protestants, catholiques et juifs. L'identité des écoles publiques était basée sur les principes généraux chrétiens, alors que l'enseignement de doctrines religieuses retombait sur des organisations religieuses. Mais au fil du temps l'interprétation de la finalité de l'enseignement public dans la loi néerlandaise a changé. **MÉTHODE.** Dans cet article, nous analysons la discussion sur ce but et sa traduction dans la pratique éducative dans la période 1801-1920. Nous utilisons des sources primaires et secondaires de la période étudiée. **RÉSULTATS.** Dans les premières décennies du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le système fut critiqué par des groupes orthodoxes de protestants et catholiques qui étaient mécontents de la pratique pédagogique des écoles publiques, pour ne pas être suffisamment protestantes d'une part, et trop protestantes d'autre part. Politiquement ce problème trouva une solution avec la Constitution de 1848 dans laquelle le principe de liberté d'éducation fut établi. Les années suivantes les écoles confessionnelles commencèrent à former part du système éducatif des Pays-Bas, mais leur nombre augmenta substantiellement après la nouvelle Constitution de 1920 qui fournit un soutien financier éducatif pour les écoles confessionnelles privées et publiques. Pendant ce processus de privatisation confessionnelle du système éducatif, les écoles publiques perdirent leur position majoritaire, alors que leurs pratiques pédagogiques changèrent en faveur de la neutralité religieuse et politique. **DISCUSSION.** Tout cela résulta en un fait remarquable : aujourd'hui les Pays-Bas ont un système éducatif avec le moindre nombre d'écoles publiques dans le monde et le plus haut pourcentage d'écoles confessionnelles.

**Mots clés:** *Systèmes éducatifs, histoire de l'éducation, neutralité, enseignement primaire, Pays-Bas.*

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