

# Christian Teachers and Citizenship Education Today : Dealing with Tensions

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## Abstract

Several tensions are visible in contemporary Dutch society, including those around refugees and sexual diversity, and the place of (strict) religion in society has changed. From both a theoretical and empirical perspective, we examine what this means for Christian education in general and for teachers in conservative Protestant schools in particular when it comes to citizenship education. It is concluded that the role of the school board and management is important in supporting teachers and promoting a shared vision within the school. In thinking about Christian citizenship education, a focus on Christian attitudes instead of morals has become more important, as it is in religious education.

## Key Words

Dutch society, Refugees, Sexual diversity, The place of religion,  
Conservative Protestants schools, Citizenship education, The school board and management,  
Christian attitudes

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## 기독교 교사와 현대의 시민교육의 중요한 쟁점에 관한 연구

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### 논문 요약

본 논문은 최근 네덜란드 사회의 가치적 긴장 요인으로 이민자 문제, 성적 다양성, 사회 속에서 종교의 위치에서 발생하는 변화를 들고 있다. 이러한 최근의 사회적 변화에 대하여 연구자는 이론적이고 경험적인 연구방법을 사용하여 기독교교육의 의미를 일반 교육에서 그리고 특히 보수적인 개신교 학교의 교사들 속에서 탐구하고자 한다. 이러한 교육의 현장에서 이루지는 종교교육은 주로 기독교 시민교육과 기밀하게 연결되어 있다. 본 연구의 결론에서 연구자는 교사를 지원하고 학교 내에서 공유된 가치와 비전을 증진하는데 있어서, 학교 이사회와 행정가들의 역할의 중요성에 주목하였다. 특히, 기독교 시민 교육에서 도덕성을 대신하여 기독교적 태도의 고양은 중요하고 그것은 종교교육에서 의미 있는 역할을 한다.

### 〈주제어〉

이민자, 성적 다양성, 종교의 위치, 이론적이고 경험적인 연구방법, 보수적 개신교 학교, 기독교 시민교육, 공유된 가치와 비전, 기독교적 태도

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## I. Introduction

Education plays an important role in society because education aims to equip individual pupils to function in that society as well as to shape society as a whole by transmitting certain norms and values to the next generation (cf. Brighouse, 2005). Today several tensions are visible in Dutch society, for example, concerning the place of (conservative) religion, migration issues, or sexual diversity. We will examine what these tensions mean for education in general and for Christian teachers in particular, both from a theoretical and empirical perspective. We do so by first paying attention to the changed position of religion in Dutch society and its consequences for how education is organized. Then we will focus on Christian education and elaborate on what its contribution could be, related to citizenship education. Furthermore, we focus on two concrete, tense issues, namely refugees and sexual diversity, and see what is known in empirical research about how schools and/or teachers deal with these. In the Discussion section we will answer our central question, which is as follows: What do current societal tensions in Dutch society mean for Christian education in general and for teachers in strong Christian schools, in particular, to be defined as conservative Protestant schools that refer to the Reformed (Calvinistic) doctrines in their mission statements?

## II. Religion in Dutch Society: A Changing Position

Religion plays a significant role in all societies around the world. Roughly speaking, there are five variants in how state and religion can relate to each other (Cliteur, 2009). The first variant is the negative one: religion is seen as bad and perishable and a danger to the state. Political atheism (1) is pursued, and therefore religions are banned or tolerated only under very strict conditions, like in China and North Korea. The mirror image is that of theocracy (2): only one religion is tolerated and all citizens are expected to adhere to it, like in Iran and Afghanistan. The other variants are between these two extremes. In the third variant, the state establishes its own religious platform, a national church, gov-

erned by the government (3). Other religions are not banned, but the privileges are reserved for the state church, like the Anglican Church in England. In the fourth, the multicultural or multireligious variant, government allows freedom of religion and all religious movements in the country (4). The last variant allows religion, but not in the public space (5): public life has to be religiously neutral, like in France (cf. Cliteur, 2009).

The choice among these options and the way in which religions are represented in society have consequences for the place of religion in education. For example, if a country is 80% Islamic, this will have a dominant influence on the other religions. Or, if there are many religious conflicts between different religions, a plea will be made for the neutralization of society (variant 5), which it might not if religions cooperate peacefully with each other. Ultimately, this provides a great global palette of ways in which religion and religious education are organized in various countries (Davis & Miroshnikova, 2013).

The Netherlands has a fascinating tradition with respect to the relationship between state and religion, which developed from a dominant religion and the exclusion of other religions (2), with the state church as an intermediate step (3), towards a multireligious model (4): In a war with Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries, Reformation supporters fought for freedom of religion. These Protestants won the war against the Catholics. A period followed in which, depending on the place and the region, other religions were tolerated although they were not allowed to express themselves explicitly. The Enlightenment that followed (18th and 19th centuries) caused a change in thinking and the power of religion lost importance. The ideals of freedom and equality contributed to a policy of freedom of religion. All kinds of religions were free to express their opinion in public (cf. Van Eijnatten & Van Lieburg, 2005). However, today it seems that Dutch society has developed towards variant 5: religion is increasingly seen as a private issue that should be banned from the public sphere.

### **III. Christian Education Today**

The Netherlands has a long tradition of denominational education alongside public education (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Since 1917 both forms have been funded equally by the government, so all parents have the option to choose a denominational school (Denessen et al., 2005; Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Since about 1980, more than 70% of primary and secondary students attend denominational schools. However, the proportions of Protestant and Roman Catholic schools are slightly declining, and more schools of different denominations (e.g., schools with a pedagogical philosophical foundation) have appeared (CBS, 2017, 2021). The Freedom of education allows denominational schools to express their values and ideologies within educational practices, while qualifications of teachers, school subjects, and educational targets have to meet the same quality standards as public schools (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2007; Glenn and De Groof, 2005).

It is important to recognize that the way denominational schools shape their identity in daily practices can vary greatly. For Protestant primary schools, for example, research showed that schools differ in “among other things, the degree to which religious education is seen as a central goal of education and in the way shape is given to religious education (in terms of e.g., frequency of lessons, used methods, discussed topics) (⋯)” (Bertram-Troost et al., 2015a, 215). When we focus on religious education in both public and denominational schools, there are several options as to how the plural context and the way people perceive their own religion are taken into account (Grimmitt, 2000). The first option is ‘learning in religion,’ which is taught in a more or less mono-religious context and aims to create strong involvement among pupils in a specific religion. This can be seen, for example, in conservative Christian schools. The second option is ‘learning about religion,’ in which all religions are taught without any judgment. In the Netherlands every school must provide knowledge about the main features of the main religions (cf. Bertram-Troost et al., 2015b). The third option is ‘learning from religion,’ which is based on interreligious encounters (Grimmitt, 2000). Recently a fourth option has been proposed, namely ‘learning through religion,’ by which the process of giving meaning to religion is stimulated by teachers—not only by providing knowledge about the Bible and the Christian

faith, but also by inviting pupils to participate in practices that challenge them to examine Christian liturgics, norms and values (cf. Biesta & Hannam, 2020; Kunz & Van Doleweerd, 2021). In this article, we will especially focus on strong Christian schools that strive for 'learning in religion.' Teachers in these schools experience the religious ideal of children begin committed Christians as standing out above and beyond anything and/or being at work in every part of the school, because they experience Christian faith as the most important aspect of life (Markus et al., 2019). Reading the Bible, praying, and singing psalms and hymns are important daily practices in strong Christian schools, as is doctrinal teaching in higher-level classes (De Muynck et al., 2014). These school are gradually paying more attention to aspects of 'learning through religion' because it is seen as a societal task to learn to live in dialogue with religious others (Kunz & Van Doleweerd, 2021).

### *Legitimacy of strong religious schools*

In recent years, strong Christian schools, as well as other strong religious schools like Islamic and Jewish schools, have regularly been under discussion in public and political debate (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Concerns are raised about, for example, whether it is desirable that schools are allowed to have admission policies for pupils based on the religious background of children. It is questioned whether such practices contradict the aims of citizenship education (cf. Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). The tensions surrounding the legitimacy of strong religious schools been increased with the General Act on Equal Treatment of 1994. This act is about the principle of non-discrimination, which sometimes is perceived as conflicting with certain moral values of conservative religious (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Furthermore, manifestations of Muslim extremism at the beginning of this century have contributed to enhanced attention to strong religious movements, including schools, as being opposed to liberal society (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019; Helbling & Traummüller, 2020).

## **IV. Citizenship Education and Christian Calling**

Recently, the statutory citizenship task for education has been refined. Current law requires schools to promote active citizenship and social cohesion in a purposeful and coherent manner. Schools must pay significant attention to at least teaching respect for and knowledge about basic democratic values, practicing these values in the school culture, and developing social and societal competences that enable pupils to participate in pluralistic, democratic society. Schools must also teach respect for and knowledge about differences in religion, worldview, political opinion, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientations, and teach the value of equal treatment; this should also be reflected in the school culture (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2020). The act clearly expresses the educational freedom since it is highlighted that the identity of the school matters in how citizenship education is shaped. An explanation of the law, for example, says:

“Learning to function in the pluriform, democratic society (...) also requires competences (...). The interpretation of this (...) may be closely linked to the identity of the school. The primacy with regard to the interpretation therefore lies with schools and the Inspectorate will show reluctance with regard to the assessment thereof.” (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2019, 18; translation JJdJ)

However, the refining of the act is also perceived by associations for Christian education as a restriction of educational freedom because it prescribes which values should be expressed in the school culture (Van Schoonhoven, 2020).

### *Complex task*

There are several reasons why shaping citizenship education is a complex task for teachers. First, clear goals and monitoring are often lacking in schools. It is intended that the refining of the law will solve this (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016). Second, in contrast to cognitive subject areas, relatively little is known about which educational approaches are effective (Dijkstra et al., 2018). Third, the nature of citizenship education is complex since, among other reasons, the citizenship task has become extensive: it is used as an umbrella term for many

different societal issues, while schools cannot simply counterbalance voices in society that are at odds with what is intended in citizenship education (Biesta, 2020).

### *Christian Norms and Values*

Teachers in strong Christian schools feel called to be Christian teachers. They want to make connections between their religious beliefs and the curriculum and pedagogy in the school (Markus et al., 2018). This requires them to find a balance between governmental regulations, their Christian ideals (following God's commandments), and their professional considerations (Kunz & Van Doleweerd, 2021). When it comes to a Christian interpretation of citizenship education in the Dutch context, it is first important to recognize that the society is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition and that there is a considerable Christian heritage (Van Doleweerd, 2021). That means that there are important links between Christian ideals and the values of the society, like the pursuit of mercy, justice, responsibility, and uniqueness of the individual. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in relation to religious education, the way the religious diversity of a society and the concept of truth regarding religion are perceived influences Christian citizenship education. For example, mainstream Christian schools connect better with the generally applicable values and standards on citizenship education, while strong Christian schools can experience a tension between the dominant secular liberal values and the norms and values they adhere to in their tradition (Kunz & Van Doleweerd, 2021).

### *Christian Attitudes*

As previously mentioned, schools are allowed to give their own interpretations on good citizenship within the legal frameworks. It is a challenge for Christian schools to articulate where they stand (cf. Dujardin, 2020). History shows that Christians were called to enter into dialogue with society and to stand up for Christian beliefs and a pure doctrine. In the Dutch context, for example, Sunday was a day of rest for all citizens, regulated by law. Other examples held that for a long time it was law that public councils had to be opened with prayer, and

many public regulations prohibited blasphemy. Another example is the idea that, according to some strong Christians, the government should also be involved in keeping out false religions. Such issues were mainly discussed at the level of apologetics or dogmatics, and based on the premise that most citizens believed in the existence of God and an immanent reality. Today the situation is different, and much more pluralistic, in the Netherlands and other Western countries. For this reason, the dialogue with society often does not run along the line of belief or truth—see the illustrations above—but along the lines of freedom and equality. Nowadays it is more important to start with experience, because this is an important entry point for humanity after the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Taylor, 2007). This development has led to more attention to a basic Christian attitude within the Christian community—to the necessity of the incarnation of the Christian faith in life in which not only the head, but also the heart and hands are involved. This development should be reflected in Christian citizenship education, like it is acknowledged in religious education (compare to ‘learning through religion,’ see above), and focuses, for example, on attitudes of love and serving instead of only focusing on morals.

## V. Dealing with Tensions in Citizenship Education

Thus far, we have described mainly theoretical insights on our subject matter. We will enrich these with insights on current experiences of teachers in strong Christian schools and what factors (could) play a role in how they and/or their schools position themselves. Therefore, we searched for empirical studies that describe how, in Dutch schools in general and in strong Christian schools in particular, certain tense issues related to citizenship education, namely refugees and sexual diversity, are dealt with. This is not a systematic review, but it does provide input for further reflection in our Discussion.

### *Refugee Crisis and Islam*

Migration and hosting refugees are among the hot topics on which there is

division in Dutch society, a division also present among Christians (Bakker & Hoekman, 2017). In a report on social divides in general education, Kleiwegt (2016) concludes that Muslim extremism and the refugee influx have a great impact on both teachers and students. Although teachers want to encourage critical, independent thinking and an open attitude in their students, they find it difficult to determine how to do so. In educational institutions that have developed a vision for dealing with radicalism and sensitive social issues, there seems to be a more open atmosphere. School boards can help their teachers by stimulating about how they engage in “difficult conversations” with students (Kleijwegt, 2016). The same factors are also recognizable in the described case of a strong Christian post-secondary vocational school. In this situation the citizenship teacher wants to encourage students to think critically, but finds this difficult because of the fear and insecurity that students feel towards refugees—a fear that is mainly determined by seeing (radical) Islam as a threat to the Christian faith. According to De Mynck (2016), this fear of Muslim ideas is also present among parents when Christian schools start teaching refugee children. He states that schools struggle to deal with that. In another study among teachers of strong Christian primary schools, teachers say that parents regularly think in an oversimplified way about refugees and other topics. Some of the teachers take a conscious position on the refugee issue and put it forward, like one teacher says:

“Some people [parents] are very opposed to refugees. Then, I highlight Bible verses, especially for these people. ( … ) I will tell them that, in the Bible, it is often written to not discriminate against your neighbor, so also not against the neighbor who is a refugee.” (In Markus et al., 2019, 520)

The teachers in this study perceive it as their specific contributions to religious socialization to stimulate inquisitiveness among the pupils, in order to prevent them for taking statements or situations for granted. Instead, they want pupils to ask critical questions. The teachers believe that this will help pupils to overcome narrow-mindedness, to root more deeply in their faith, and to have more respect for people with other opinions (Markus et al., 2019).

### *Sexual Diversity and Safety*

Sexual diversity is also an issue that currently receives a lot of attention in the Netherlands. For the educational context, it is then emphasized that students who are gender nonconforming, LGBT, or in doubt, must feel safe in school (School & Veiligheid, n.d.). Recent research among nearly 30,000 students in 136 Dutch middle/high schools finds that sexual and gender minority adolescents are victimized more often than heterosexual, cisgender adolescents (Kaufman & Baams, 2021). In both 2020 and 2021, strong religious schools were debated in the House of Representatives in response to stories in the media about LGBT people who attended strong Christian schools. The debates were, among other things, about identity statements from the schools stating, for example, that marriage is meant for one man and one woman (Vroegindeweyj, 2020; Redactie politiek, 2021). People involved in strong Christian schools experience that they are a minority in relation to a secular majority and that the space to share their beliefs is curtailed. In a poll on political and media attention to citizenship education among 13 principals of strong Christian primary schools, something similar was indicated by over 60% of respondents (De Jong-Markus & Vermeulen, 2021). For example, one respondent said: “It gives me a feeling that citizenship is being used to make certain aspects mandatory in the school. I think, for example, of the LGBT lobby.” (De Jong-Markus & Vermeulen, 2021, 2; translation JJd)

The Inspectorate of Education concludes that schools generally meet the legal requirements of promoting respectful attitudes toward sexual diversity (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016). There are few differences between schools when it comes to the importance attached to the theme and how purposefully they deal with it. The school’s identity does not seem to influence this either, although it is striking that schools with a specific religious or philosophical identity have more elaborated visions than other schools. More often they focus on promoting respect towards sexual diversity or countering prejudices. The attention schools pay to sexual diversity, sexual resilience, and sexual education is often incidental and fragmentary. Another study of the Inspectorate focuses explicitly on dealing with moral views that (strongly) deviate from mainstream views in

society in relation to citizenship education. This study concludes that there are almost no schools where teaching is contrary to basic democratic values, even in schools with (very) deviant moral views (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020). However, there is a need in general to more actively promote basic values (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016, 2020). In this regard, the Inspectorate states:

“In all schools, active promotion of basic values is important. This is especially true in schools where pupils (...) may misunderstand the views conveyed by the school. Although these schools comply with the legal task, this still requires attention. Because the core of the citizenship task is that schools promote the values that make our free and democratic society possible. Educational freedom gives room to transmit one's own views, but this is only possible if there is also room for people - including pupils - who live, think or believe differently.” (Inspectorate of Education, 2020, 3)

In a report on LGBTI students in a specific strong Christian middle/high school, the Inspectorate states that, although the school is experienced as safe by the vast majority of the students, staff, and parents, the board and school management have paid insufficient attention to the well-being and safety of pupils who do not share the views and behaviors that are widely shared within the community in and around the school. The Inspectorate indicates that it is important that the board and school management support teachers with concrete guidance to reinforce their competence and provide a shared policy on how a safe climate could be realized within the school. The school board believes that some of the conclusions drawn by the inspectorate based on the findings are too far-reaching, and that, for example, insufficient account was taken of the impact of COVID-19 measures on the ability to carry out the curriculum (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021). Interestingly, Rijke (2019) notes that the diversity of opinions around sexual ethics increases among strong Christians. He perceives that the clashes that occur within strong Christian communities around homosexuality, for example, are similar to those seen in society between secular liberals and strong Christians.

## VI. Conclusion

Our research question was: What do current societal tensions in Dutch society mean for Christian education in general and for teachers in strong Christian schools in particular? We first placed this question in a broader context by looking at the relationship between state and religion and concluded that this influences how religious education is organized in a country. For the Netherlands, the place of religion in society is changing. Though in the country's earlier history Christianity was the dominant religion and other religions were excluded, by the 18th and 19th centuries there was more room for all religious people to freely express their opinions in public. Nowadays, the Netherlands seems to be moving toward a situation where there is less room for religious expression in public life. The Netherlands has a long tradition of denominational education alongside public education with equal funding from the government. In recent years, strong religious schools have regularly been under discussion in public and political debate, which also reflects the changed position of religion in Dutch society. The questions that are asked are often related to themes central to citizenship education. For teachers in Christian schools, therefore, an important question is how to connect Christian values with citizenship education. In the Dutch context, it is relevant that the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Christian heritage in society influence how good citizenship is commonly perceived. Next to that, an important factor is how religious diversity in society and the concept of truth is considered among teachers in the school. Teachers in strong Christian schools will experience more tension between the dominant secular liberal values in their society and the values that they consider to be important in their religious tradition. History shows that Christians were called to enter into dialogue with society and to stand up for Christian beliefs and a pure doctrine. Nowadays, it is more important to use the attitude of experience and providing more attention to a basic Christian attitude. This development should be reflected in Christian citizenship education.

In empirical studies about two tense societal issues, namely refugees and sexual diversity, we discovered that dealing with these issues is not only difficult

in strong Christian schools but also in schools in general. Teachers show a willingness to promote good citizenship, but feel also insufficiently competent. In addition, they sometimes have to relate to parents who have views that are at odds with what is promoted within citizenship education. The Inspectorate of Education emphasizes that it is generally important to more actively promote basic democratic values. For strong religious schools it is emphasized that there is an extra need to do so, because the views conveyed by the school could be misunderstood by students or students might have views or behaviors that deviate from what is widely shared within the school community. The role of the school board and management is important in supporting teachers and promoting a shared vision and policy in the school regarding tense issues. Since citizenship education is by definition a complex task, but especially because teachers in strong Christian schools experience that the space to share their beliefs is curtailed in society. We suggest that the changed position of religion in society should be consciously taken into account by school board, management and teachers, which means that there is not only attention paid to morals, but certainly also to Christian attitudes when it is about citizenship education.

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