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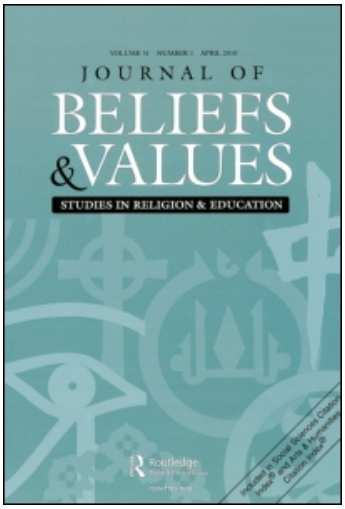

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Being a Christian school in the Netherlands: An analysis of 'identity' conceptions and their practical implications

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Being a Christian school in the Netherlands: an analysis of 'identity' conceptions and their practical implications

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ABSTRACT *In the Netherlands 'identity of Christian schools' has become a standard expression in discussions about Christian schools. However, it is a rather abstract and general expression and it is reasonable to assume that a closer look at literature and practice will present us with a more diverse picture of its meaning and practical implications. This article describes an empirical study, in three Protestant primary schools, into conceptions of 'identity of Christian schools' and the practical implications of these conceptions. It compares the ideas and practices of the teachers with each other and with Dutch academic literature on Christian schools. The comparisons illustrate that the interpretation of the religious dimension of 'identity' has most influence on ideas about the aims and practices of a Christian school.*

Introduction

Two-thirds of the primary schools in the Netherlands are Christian, even though the country has been predominantly secular for several decades. The denominational distribution is the heritage of the religious and political history of the Netherlands (see De Ruyter & Miedema, 1999, 2000) in which religious groups had (and still have) the constitutional right to offer their children denominational education.

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Given the discrepancy between the current Christian adherence of the Dutch population and the amount of Christian schools, it is not surprising that Christian schools are under debate. In these discussions, politicians, academics and teachers commonly use the expression 'the identity of Christian schools' to underline or deny that there is something particular about these schools and thereby to defend or attack their existence. 'Identity of Christian schools' has become a standard expression in the Dutch language, but it is a rather abstract and general expression and it can be presumed that a closer look at literature and practice will present us with a more diverse picture of its meaning. This article describes the results of such a closer look. It discusses and compares the way in which Dutch teachers and academics conceptualise 'identity' and how they envisage the practice of Christian schools.

We will first present three conceptions of 'identity' of Christian schools that we found in Dutch academic literature. These formed the basis of a selection of three Protestant primary schools that were the practical counterparts of the found conceptions. We will describe and illustrate the ideas and practices of the teachers of these schools and compare these to each other as well as to our analysis of Dutch academic literature. Finally, we will discuss the outcomes of our empirical study and the insights we gained from the comparison of these with our findings in the literature.

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Three Conceptions of 'Identity of a Christian School'

On the basis of an analysis of Dutch literature about Christian schools we have reconstructed three conceptions of 'identity of a Christian school' (see De Wolff, De Ruyter & Miedema, 2002). These conceptions represent a unique position with regard to four aspects of 'identity of a Christian school', namely the definition of 'identity', dimensions of 'identity', the relatively abstract or concrete nature of identity and its static or dynamic character.

Conception 1 authors define 'identity' as 'what makes a school a *Christian* school'. This definition focuses on the distinction between Christian and non-Christian schools and 'identity' is conceived as being one-dimensional: religious. A school can be called a Christian school if it serves a specific religious purpose, i.e. transmitting the Christian commitment and a corresponding Christian lifestyle (cf. Hordijk & Steenhuis, 1992). Most conception 1 authors do not write about the influence of particular contexts and practices on the identity of a Christian school. We are therefore inclined to conclude that these authors believe that the identity of a Christian school is primarily defined by abstract basic beliefs and values, which is similar for all Christian schools and relatively static. Orthodox Protestant authors emphasise the relatively static character of identity, for instance by writing about identity in terms of 'the foundation' of the school (cf. Golverdingen, 1996).

Conception 2 authors define 'identity of a Christian school' as 'what makes a (Christian) school *this particular* (Christian) school'. They discern several identity dimensions, namely a religious, a pedagogical and/or an educational and an organisational dimension (see Hermans & Van Vugt, 1997; Miedema, 1994). Most of them claim that the dimensions are of equal importance, though some argue that the

pedagogical and educational dimensions are the most important, because schools are primarily educational and pedagogical institutions (see Miedema, 1994). Furthermore, conception 2 authors claim that identity of a Christian school is historical and relatively dependent on its particular context and daily practices. This implies that the identity of a Christian school is understood to be relatively dynamic; it is a temporary outcome of interaction between the school's beliefs and values on the one hand and everyday practices in the school on the other.

Conception 3 is, in many respects, similar to conception 2. 'Identity of a Christian school' is defined identically and also interpreted as something that is multidimensional, historical and relatively dynamic. There are, however, two different reasons for distinguishing a separate conception. Some authors argue that the religious dimension is fundamental to the other dimensions of identity, thus not of equal importance (cf. Klifman, Westerman & Schermer, 1993; Knevelbaard, 1992), others maintain that the religious foundation of a Christian school is unchangeable, thus not relatively dynamic (cf. Hermans, 1993). Both views ultimately come close to opinions held by conception 1 authors and therefore justify a third conception of 'identity of a Christian school'.

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Method

We conducted explorative case studies in three Dutch Protestant primary schools. Each of the schools was representative of one of the three conceptions described in the former section. The schools were selected on the basis of a short questionnaire sent to about 300 Protestant primary schools, which asked them to give their views on the aspects of identity we described at the beginning of the section above. On the basis of their answers, we found three schools that matched the conceptions in the literature. The aim of the study was twofold. Firstly, we wanted to get an insight into the ideas of teachers about the identity of Christian schools, and, secondly, we wanted to investigate if their ideas indeed reflected the three conceptions of identity described here.

School 1 is representative of conception 1. It is a church-related orthodox Protestant school with a religiously homogeneous teacher and student body. All the teachers and 98% of the pupils are practising church members. School 2 and school 3, being representatives of conceptions 2 and 3, are more liberal Protestant schools. All the teachers of both schools are Christians, but the religious background of the pupils is diverse. The student body of school 2 reflects *external* diversity: 23% of the pupils are Muslim, 13% Christian, and 64% are not religious. The student body of school 3 reflects *internal* diversity: 88% of the pupils are Christian, but from different churches and ranging from practising Christians to cultural Christians.

The empirical research focused on four questions: (1) How do the teachers and principals of these schools conceptualise 'identity of a Christian school'? (2) How do they describe the identity of their own school? (3)What are their ideas about the practical significance of this identity? (4) How do they apply the identity of their school in daily practices? We used several methods to answer these questions: semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals, written questionnaires for

parents and pupils, and text-analysis of relevant school documents. This article focuses on the outcomes of the interviews with the teachers and the principals.

In every school six teachers and the principal were interviewed, from now on referred to as 'the teachers'. They were interviewed twice. The first interview had an explorative character and addressed three topics, namely the identity of a Christian school in general, their own school's identity and the practical significance of this identity. The second interview aimed to obtain more concrete and specific information about the ways in which the teachers put the identity of their school into practice. In this interview five practical dilemmas were presented. The teachers were asked to describe as precisely as possible how they would react in this situation and to articulate their justification for their action. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a qualitative coding system.

The analysis resulted in a description of each school that was used to make two comparisons: (i) between the three schools, and (ii) between the three schools and the three reconstructed conceptions. Our expectation was that the teachers in the schools would have different conceptions of identity, which were mirror images of the three reconstructed conceptions, and that these conceptions would influence school practices, illustrating the importance of a conception of identity and clarifying the influence of a particular conception of identity. In the next section we will present the answers to the four research questions and describe the results of the two comparisons.

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Results

Identity Conceptions

In response to our general question 'How would you define "identity of a Christian school"?', two or three teachers of each school give a definition of 'identity' similar to that of conception 2 and 3, namely as the characteristics of one particular Christian school. These teachers also state that 'identity' has several dimensions. Four or five teachers of each school define 'identity' as the Christian commitment or tradition of the school. However, in response to the question of whether they think that identity has one dimension or more, they all say that 'identity of a Christian school' has both a religious and a pedagogical/educational dimension.

All interviewees emphasise that there is a connection between the religious tradition of a Christian school and its pedagogical/educational ideas. Furthermore, the teachers seem to attribute special status to the religious dimension of identity, because all argue against the view that this is as important as the pedagogical and educational dimensions. These findings lead us to believe that all teachers are conception 3 supporters. This is interesting, because conception 2 is dominant in Dutch literature. Furthermore, almost all teachers state that a Christian school's identity has aspects that are common to all Christian schools but at the same time specific for one particular school. In the literature, conception 1 authors hold the first idea and conception 2 and 3 authors the second. Apparently, the teachers believe that these ideas can be combined. This is also true for the other two aspects.

According to the teachers, 'identity' refers both to basic beliefs as well as daily practices and identity is both static and dynamic. These responses to the question formulated *in abstracto* suggest that the teachers have a conception of 'identity of a Christian school' that is different from the conceptions found in the literature. Is this also true for their responses to the question regarding the identity of their own schools?

In the description of the identity of their own school, almost all teachers focus on the religious dimension: they mention the impact of the Christian tradition on pedagogical, educational and organisational aspects of their school, which is similar to conception 1 and 3. For instance, a school 1 teacher describes the identity of his school as:

> We strictly adhere to the Christian principles […]. There is a good atmosphere in the school and a pleasant collegiality […]. I hope that people notice that we listen to everyone and that we are strongly child-orientated. I hope parents will understand that these are manifestations of the Christian principles.

A school 2 teacher gives the following description:

> I think our school tries to give a lot of attention to each individual child. We try to assist the child in their development towards maturity on the basis of our Christian faith […]. Many children have problems at home, problems with parents. […] A lot of children are in need of someone who accompanies them, because their parents are failing in this respect. In this way you can mean a lot to children, in addition to your teaching.

Finally, one of the teachers from school 3 says:

> This school uses the Bible as the guiding principle for our interaction and co-operation, for giving children a safe and secure basis. (translation by authors)

Thus, the responses of most of the teachers to our general questions do not present a conception that is entirely similar to the ones found in the literature. Their ideas are a configuration of elements of the three identity conceptions. Interestingly, however, their descriptions of the identity of their own school do have aspects that are in line with the conceptions we thought they would represent. School 1 teachers identify the Christian tradition of their school with the Christian faith and believe this to be rather stable. In their view, the Christian faith plays a central and possibly even foundational role for the educational and pedagogical aims and practices of the teachers. The descriptions of both school 2 and 3 teachers are mainly consistent with conception 3. They conceptualise the Christian tradition of their school in terms of an ethical orientation based on the Christian faith and consider this orientation to be directive for the school and its pedagogical and educational principles, which is in line with conception 3. They believe that the identity of their school is dynamic, but make an explicit exception for the religious dimension of identity, which is also similar to the ideas of conception 3 authors. Thus, again we have to conclude that none of the practitioners advocate conception 2, even though this is the dominant position in the literature.

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'Identity' in Aims and Practices of Schools

The fact that the teachers of the three schools had different, though also clearly overlapping, conceptions of the identity of their own school, leads us to the expectation that they would also describe different aims and practices, because we assumed that their conceptions of 'identity of a Christian school', consisting of a particular and unique configuration of characteristics, would influence their practices and practical reflections. Additionally, we were interested to find out whether or not the ideas of the teachers were comparable to those of the authors supporting the same conception.

For the analysis of the responses of the teachers and the literature, we clustered aims and practices in four domains, namely the religious, the pedagogical, the educational/curricular and the organisational domains. The religious domain consisted of views about those aims and practices of the school intended to enable children to develop a religious conception of life. The pedagogical domain covered a number of topics: pedagogical aims of the school, the pedagogical attitude of the teacher and the pedagogical climate of the school. The educational/curricular domain comprised of aims and content of teaching and teaching styles. The organisational domain referred to the management of the school and issues at the level of the school as an institution, for instance admission and staff policy, relationships between the staff members and with parents.

Interestingly, neither in the literature nor in the views of the teachers did we find a difference in ideas with regard to the pedagogical, didactical/curricular and organisational domains: all the authors and teachers propose similar ways in which the identity can be put into practice in these domains. However, we did find distinctive differences in both the literature, and in the three schools, with regard to the religious domain. The ideas differ with respect to two interrelated aspects: the aim of religious education and the permeation of religion in the other domains of the school. Again, we will first give a concise description of the ideas of the authors (see also De Wolff *et al.*, 2002) and then present the ideas of the teachers more extensively.

Conception 1 authors argue that Christian schools should contribute to the formation and deepening of Christian beliefs, values and attitudes of pupils. To achieve this, Christian schools should offer Christian nurture. All conception 1 authors maintain that Christian nurture is a crucial or essential characteristic of a Christian school, but there are two different interpretations of this claim. Where some claim that all aims and practices, including the school climate and organisational arrangements, should support Christian nurture, others only state that these may never be in conflict with Christian beliefs and values.

Conception 2 authors claim that pupils in Christian schools should be stimulated to develop sensitivity to the religious and spiritual dimensions of life. Religious education should provide pupils with the concepts and ideas that are necessary to reflect on the meaning of life and to come to a personal, reflected conception of life (cf. Hermans & Van Vugt, 1997; Miedema, 1994). These aims are not only—or not predominantly—justified on religious grounds, but also on pedagogical and educa-

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tional grounds; religious aims and practices should be compatible with pedagogical and educational principles. With regard to the permeation of the Christian tradition into the aims and practices of the school, conception 2 authors seem to advocate the less demanding position that the intended beliefs, values and attitudes should not conflict.

The ideas of conception 3 authors are similar to those of conception 2 authors. Their ideas differ with regard to the aims of religious education. They state that pupils in Christian schools should be strongly encouraged to become Christians. They emphasise, more than conception 2 authors, the importance of an explicit introduction to the Christian tradition. With regard to the permeation of the Christian tradition, most conception 3 authors defend the view that the intended beliefs, values and attitudes should be reflected across the entire curriculum, the school climate and the organisational arrangements of the school, explicitly as well as implicitly.

The ideas of the teachers were analogous to the conceptions we thought their schools would represent. Because the teachers described the practice of their schools extensively, we will illustrate their proposed aims with practical examples.

The teachers of school 1 aspire to transmit and/or to deepen the Christian faith of pupils and to educate pupils into an all-embracing Christian lifestyle. Their ideal is a committed, authentic Christian believer who shapes his/her life completely in accordance with the Christian commitment. The teachers give a religious justification of this aim, that is: the absolute truth and value of the Christian faith.

School 1 tries to achieve its religious aim in several ways. Firstly, the school offers explicit religious activities. Every school day starts with prayer, singing hymns, or other Christian songs, and a lesson about biblical history. In these lessons the biblical stories are told and explicated from an exclusivist and absolute stance. School days also close with singing and prayer. Every Monday morning and Friday afternoon pupils and staff gather for a communal worship. Secondly, the teachers try to realise a way of living inside the school that reflects God's love for human beings and that corresponds with values that are based on this love. For instance, they refer explicitly to Christian beliefs during secular lessons and classroom discussions; they tell pupils how someone should behave or think about ethical issues from a biblical perspective and which implications Christian belief has for human (social) behaviour; in correcting pupils' behaviour they sometimes refer to the Bible or the Christian faith; they draw pupils' attention to God's grace for human beings, or to the way Jesus treated other people, in order to stimulate a sensitive and loving attitude towards each other. Additionally, the teachers want to be a role model for pupils by telling pupils about their own religious experiences and showing them how their personal relationship with God influences their way of acting in daily situations. Therefore, the teachers pay much attention to the well-being of colleagues, pupils and parents. Finally, school 1 only uses learning materials that are in line with Christian beliefs or a Christian lifestyle. Books about witches are, for instance, excluded.

The majority of the teachers interviewed of schools 2 and 3 formulate more formal and open-ended aims of religious education. They aspire to introduce pupils to the

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Christian faith, rituals and ceremonies and to teach them the values and attitudes that arise from this faith, for instance respect and servitude. Their ultimate aim is to give pupils insight into the meaning and importance of the Christian faith; they hope that pupils will become Christian adherents themselves or incorporate elements of the Christian faith tradition in their future personal conception of life. Finally, the teachers of school 2 and school 3 try to encourage their pupils to take a respectful attitude towards people with other cultural and religious backgrounds. They justify these aims with three reasons. Firstly, they value highly the Christian tradition that they believe to be important both for their personal life and for society. Secondly, they want to give pupils a substantive religious education comprising more than just 'information about' religions. Thirdly, they argue that these aims will contribute to the preparation of pupils for living in a multicultural and religiously plural society. How do the teachers of school 2 and school 3 try to realise their aims?

School 2 teachers are free to decide how they begin the school day; some pray regularly, others do not. In school 3 every teacher starts with prayer and singing hymns or other Christian songs. Both schools organise school worship. School 2 has weekly meetings and school 3, for pragmatic reasons, only once a year. Furthermore, both schools teach religious education twice or three times a week. In these lessons the teachers try to connect the biblical stories to daily life situations and the personal experiences of pupils, wishing to demonstrate the meaning and value of these stories for the present-day lives of people. School 2 teachers also give the Islamic pupils the opportunity to talk about the Koran and Islamic rituals and practices, thereby showing the importance of being respectful to the beliefs and culture of non-Christian people. Some teachers also discuss differences and similarities between the Christian and Islamic tradition, in order to make these more understandable for Islamic pupils.

The teachers of schools 2 and 3 also try to foster moral and religious beliefs and values across the whole curriculum, for instance by means of classroom discussions about interaction between pupils or more abstract ethical issues. However, during these discussions usually the teachers do not mention the Christian faith explicitly. Sometimes they remind pupils of something that was discussed in a RE lesson. Furthermore, the teachers stress the importance of their attitude towards pupils and colleagues. They consider it essential that their attitude and teaching styles are in line with values that they see as a part of the Christian tradition, for instance honesty, respect, servitude and solidarity. They try to demonstrate the importance and concrete implications of these values.

The similarities between schools 2 and 3 and the differences between them and school 1 are comparable with the similarities and differences we found in the literature. Do the teachers have the same views on the permeation of the Christian tradition in their school as the described conceptions?

School 1 teachers perceive the Christian tradition of their school as the Christian *faith*, which is essential and foundational for the school. The teachers give a precise description of the core doctrines of their faith, which they characterise as unchangeable. They all say that the Christian faith has an important impact on their way of thinking and acting, including their educational/pedagogical aims and practices.

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This impact is both implicit and unintended because it is mediated by basic beliefs as well as explicit in their attempt to relate the Christian faith to their pedagogical and educational views and practices, aspiring to model a strong and authentic Christian commitment. However, these statements are not entirely unambiguous. On the one hand, several teachers claim that in their own school the Christian faith plays a decisive role in their pedagogy and education and that therefore their views and practices are in some way *different* from those based on non-Christian beliefs. On the other hand, when we asked them about their concrete aims and daily practices in the classroom, several teachers of school 1 argue that those aims and practices do not differ from that of a non-Christian teacher. Moreover, they argue that next to religious principles, pedagogical/educational principles are also driving forces for their school, just as they are for all schools.

The teachers of school 2 and school 3 perceive the Christian tradition of their school as an *ethical orientation*. This orientation is based on, and legitimised by, the Christian faith, but not exclusively derived from the Christian faith. Several teachers, for instance, state that the common basic morality of society is also part of this ethical orientation. How do the teachers of schools 2 and 3 see the impact of the Christian orientation inside the school? As we have already described, it is the teachers' intention to ensure that their attitude towards pupils and their teaching styles are in line with Christian values. Contrary to the teachers of school 1, they talk about this ethical orientation in terms of 'being in accordance with' more than 'being derived from' the Christian faith. This is also true for their views on educational/pedagogical aims. They argue that their pedagogical/educational aims and principles are a result of a dynamic interplay of both the Christian tradition and educational/pedagogical aims and are not completely different from non-Christian schools.

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of Dutch publications and the three case studies have shown that the perception of the Christian tradition, and its position for the education and pedagogy of the school, influence the view on the aims of a Christian school and the way in which these aims should be realised.

Conception 1 supporters advocate a Christian school in which the central aim is to educate children in the Christian faith and a corresponding Christian lifestyle. Teaching styles, the school climate and organisational arrangements of the school are derived from the Christian commitment, and Christian values and beliefs explicitly encouraged. This conception of Christian schools is based on an exclusivist view of the Christian faith and the idea that this faith should permeate the education and pedagogy of the school decisively. The case study of school 1 has given us examples of this view and its implications on practice. School 1 teachers relate their central pedagogical and moral values and beliefs to the Christian faith, i.e. their personal relationship with God, which transforms their perspective and provides both justification and motivation for adopting the values in question. For this reason, they also find it important to be an effective role model for pupils. They see this as a crucial way to positively encourage pupils towards a strong, authentic

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Christian commitment and a corresponding lifestyle. However, in describing concrete aims and classroom situations, the practical implications of their theoretical identity conception are not always as clear as was expected.

Conception 2 and 3 are based on the belief that a Christian school is also, or primarily, a pedagogical/educational institution. Aims and practices of Christian schools should not be dominated by a particular religious tradition or by religious interests, though pupils should be introduced into the Christian tradition. The authors also state that religious education should take place across the whole curriculum, but in a different way than conception 1 envisages. According to conception 2 and 3 supporters, the school climate and organisational arrangements of the school should not be in conflict with Christian values and beliefs, or should be such that Christian values and beliefs are encouraged implicitly or explicitly. The Christian tradition of the school is perceived as an ethical orientation, which should be integrated in, and influenced by, pedagogical and educational aims and principles of the school. Furthermore, conceptions 2 and 3 are based on an inclusive or a pluralist view of the Christian faith (see Hick, 1995). In this view, the educational meaning and importance of basic Christian beliefs and values are not dependent on transmitting the Christian faith. Stimulating children towards beliefs and values like justice and servitude is considered to be of educational importance *per se*. This also implies that aims and ideals that are considered to be important within the Christian tradition, can comport well with aims and ideals based on pedagogical/educational grounds.

The outcomes of our case studies in schools 2 and 3 show that there are fewer differences between the schools than we expected. In both schools the teachers' conception of 'identity of a Christian school' and their ideals and aspirations concerning their own school are similar to conception 3. However, their descriptions of concrete aims and daily practice in their schools are more in line with conception 2. We think that the main reason for this outcome is the highly implicit and 'inspirational' role of the Christian tradition, particularly in school 2. Additionally, school 2 teachers value highly inter-religious dialogue and respect. These practices are also more similar to conception 2 than conception 3, which claims that the religious dimension or the Christian tradition is a fundamental and more or less unchangeable aspect of the school. Thus, while school practices are examples of conception 2, teachers do not tend to defend conception 2 explicitly. It might be possible that they believe that accepting this conception in the end will lead to a renunciation of the Christian tradition of the school.

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