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Im Auftrag des Vorstandes herausgegeben von
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1. Introduction

Parental choice in education or the free choice by parents of their children's school is one of the major topics in educational policy. The introduction of a more parental choice in educational systems is often advocated as a means to introduce competition for pupils between schools, thus improving the quality of teaching, decreasing the level of bureaucracy in and around schools and reducing costs. The major problem of introducing more parental choice is finding balance between the parental freedom of school choice and the aims of a national educational policy (promotion of equal opportunities, fair payment of the costs of education, balanced provision of societally relevant education). The Dutch case is interesting for the way in with it balances parental choice and national educational policy since the 1920s: it combines parental choice and equal subsidizing and treatment of public and religious schools by the state.

In this article I will start to sketch the historical background of Dutch parental choice (section 2.1).

Non-public schools means in the Dutch case mostly religious schools. Despite a strong decline of religiousness in Dutch society, the religious schools maintained a large share of pupils. Also in other societies with not very active religious populations (like Australia and France), the number of religious schools is increasing. The Dutch case therefore offers insight into the mechanism of the stability or even increase in the number of religious schools in irreligious societies. These mechanism are discussed in section 2.2.

The co-existence of public and religious schools can have serious negative consequences for the educational inequality and thus for society as a whole. The Dutch case is present as an example for avoiding these negative consequences (section 2.3).

A dual educational system of public and religious schools can be both expensive and efficient (section 2.4).

The last sections give a short overview of some recent debates and new initiatives regarding parental choice in the Netherlands (section 3 and 4).

2. *The present system*

2.1 Historical background

The freedom oft parents to select a school for their children was one of the most important topics in the 19th century Netherlands. The political struggle between the liberal, dominant class and the catholic and orthodox-protestant lower classes gave rise to christian-democrat parties which have held central political power since the start of the 20th century until 1994. The political struggle was not unique to the Netherlands, but rather the unintended result of three interacting processes: the struggle between the state and the established churches in Continental Europe; the fight between the 18th century ancien regime (mostly with one state-church and suppressed religious minorities) and the 19th century liberal state (which claimed to be neutral to all churches); and the emergence of new social classes in the 19th century which rejected the dominant classes, both liberal and conservative[1]. Nor was the outcome of these three interacting processes unique to the Netherlands: in several continental European societies (Austria, Belgium, France, some German *Bundesländern*[2]) these processes had more or less comparable results, with public and religious-subsidized school sectors offering parents a choice between schools with the same curriculum and usually comparable financial costs for the parents[3].

In the Netherlands, the choice between religious and public schools was not only an educational choice: it was closely connected to other choices in life – voting, church activities, membership in clubs, unions, newspapers, etc. The choice between public and religious schools was linked to the choice between the catholic, orthodox-protestant and public sub-cultures – or „pillars", as they were called in the Netherlands (LIJPHART 1968).

A consequence of these religious grounds for the rise of subsidized schools was that parental choice on educational grounds (quality of schooling in public and religious schools) did not exist during the first half of the 20th century. Religious considerations and considerations based on belonging to a specific sub-culture were dominant, with perhaps only some elite groups the exception to this rule[4]. Free parental choice of schools was a religious choice. Since

1 Of course, these three processes did not have equal importance in different societies.

2 For instance, secundary schools in Nordrhein-Westfalen can be distinguished on their Schulträgerschaft (öffentlich, katholisch, evangelisch).

3 For good reasons, these processes had a quite different effect in the United Kingdom (ARCHER 1984). The United States has never experienced these long conflicts over school between the state and the church or the ancien regime and the liberal state.

4 It can be shown that during the first half of the 20th century, children from elite catholic families had a preference for public universities and non-catholic student organizations, despite the existence of a Dutch catholic university and the small distances within the Netherlands (DRONKERS/HILLEGE 1995). An explanation of this phenomenon is that they saw catholic organizations and universities as serving their more humble, upwardly-mobile catholic brothers, and as a means of controlling them.

religious socialization was seen as closely connected to education, the freedom of parents to choose a public or religious school at equal costs was known as „freedom of education", a concept which originally reffered to one of the basic human rights formulated during the French Revolution[5].

The Dutch educational system is, however, unique in several other respects when compared to other European countries with similar state-subsidized religious and public schools sectors. First, in most such countries the religious schools are of one denomination: Catholic or the former protestant state church. This is not the case in the Netherlands, which, as a result of its roots in the 16h century religions wars, has an important catholic population within a moderate protestant state. Besides the public sector (which mostly governed by local municipalities), as outcome of the 19th century political struggle, there exist since the 1920s, a catholic, a protestant, and a neutral religious sector, none of which has a central school board. Within the catholic and protestant school sectors there are coordination bodies at the national level which also function as lobbies, but they do not replace the mainly local, autonomous boards, nor do they co-ordinate all protestant or catholic schools (they generally have the juridical form of a foundation, with a high degree of self-selection of new board members).

The interesting point here is that in other societies the difference between school sectors is often confused with the characteristics of the only church that dominates their religious school sector. COLEMAN and HOFFER's (1987) study is a good example of this tendency in the United States: they focus on the common social capital and values of the catholic church to explain different school-sector effects. This explanation cannot be used to explain comparable effects in the Dutch protestant school sector, which serves too many different protestant churches to form one community with common social capital and values.

Second, the interpretation of „freedom of education" or parental choice was enshrined in the constitution of 1917 as the final result of the political struggle of the 19th century. This article has never been changed, despite it old-fashioned wording and inapplicability to some modern issues, such as the relation between education and the labour market. In the late 1980s, major changes in the Dutch constitution were introduced, yet one of the few articles that was not changed was that on „freedom of education", its old-fashioned wording being too sensitive to change without reviving the school struggle of the 19th century.

This unchanged article in the constitution prescribes the equal subsidizing by the state of all school sectors: they are subjected to strong controlls such as equal

5 Originally, the concept of freedom of education referred to the freedom to *teach* without church approval, contrary to the situation of the ancien regime. Later, it came to mean freedom of persons and juridical bodies to establish and maintain schools of different denominations under equal conditions to public schools maintained by the liberal state (BOX/DRONKERS/MOLENAAR/DE MULDER 1977).

examinations, salary, capital investment, etc. by the national state (for more information, see JAMES 1984). In the early 20th century, this equal subsidy was confined to primary education (according to the constitution), but during the following 50 years it was extended to all types of education, until in 1972 the protestant and catholic universities were also fully subsidized by the state and thus the same footing as public universities (without any change to the constitution). The interesting point for other societies to note is that the Netherlands has almost the only educational system with equal subsidies and treatment for religious and public schools. From the Dutch point of view, certain debates in other societies on parental choice closely resemble debates on this topic in the Netherlands in the second half of the 19th century. Those debates focused among others on the lower quality of religious schools and the unfairness of paying taxes for public schools and extra money for the preferred religious school.

Third, the equal subsidizing of all religious and public schools has promoted a decrease of prestigious elite schools outside the state-subsidized sector. As a consequence of equal subsidizing and the prohibited use of extra funds for teacher grants, smaller classes, etc., there no longer exists any longer an institutionalized hierarchy of schools within each school type, such as in most Anglo-Saxon societies (the English public schools or independent grammar schools; the Ivy League, or the difference in the quality between schools in the poor inner cities and those in the rich suburbs in the United States).

The Dutch case is therefore interesting for other societies to observe in the regard to the possible effects of free parental choice combined with equal subsidies and treatment of public and religious schools within the same educational type, noting that the effects in the Dutch example are not being biased by the creaming-off of the most able students, by the financial possibilities of different sectors, nor by geographical constraints on parental choice. It is not always true that in an education market a hierarchy of schools need to be expected if parental choice is significant and competition between schools exist. It is only the case when schools are allowed to enjoy different financial resources and are treated differently by the state. The non-existence in the Netherlands of an institutionalized hierarchy of schools within the same type cannot be explained by the irrelevance of educational outcomes for subsequent occupational attainment or income, attributed to attained educational level since such variance is attributed to attained educational level more than in most other societies (DRONKERS/BAKKER 1989; DRONKERS 1992b).

2.2 *Religious schools in an less religious society*

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, the religious sub-structures or pillars in Dutch society broke down rapidly. In 1947 only 17 percent of the population did not officially belong to any church; by 1995 the proportion had increased to 40 percent. The same trend can be seen in the votes in favour of christian-democrat parties in national elections: in 1948 they received 55 percent; in 1994, less then 30 percent of the vote. The first thing one might expect as a result is a decline in institutions such as religious schools that depend on religious affiliation for their recruitment. However, although such a decline occurred in a number of organizations and institutions (unions, journals, clubs, hospitals), it did not affect the educational system. In 1950, 73 percent of all pupils in primary education were attending a non-public school; in 1993, 68 percent.

How then can one explain the non-disappearance of religious education or the failure of public schools to attract the growing number of children of non-religious parents (Dronkers 1992a)? This issue is also of interest to other societies with a growing number of religious schools and increasing pressure for subsidizing, along with a not very active religious population (as is the case in most industrial societies, with the exception of the United States). The Dutch situation therefore offers insight into the mechanisms of the increase in religious schools in not particularly religious societies.

At least eight mechanisms can perhaps explain the existence of religious schools in Dutch society: 1. financial differences; 2. student intake; 3. political protection; 4. educational administration; 5. religious values; 6. educational conservatism; 7. the community and values of the church; 8. deliberate educational choice.

A first explanation might be the *financial differences* between school sectors. Dutch schools do not differ greatly in their fees. Religious schools charge certain extra fees (an average of Gld. 200, equal to 170 DM), which are mostly used for extra-curricular activities. The choice of parents here can hardly be influenced by financial considerations. The irrelevance of financial criteria for choice during a school career is shown in various educational attainment studies (De Graaf 1987). Financial differences is not a good explanation for the existence of religious schools.

Differences in *student intake* explain, on the average, only one third of the outcome differences between schools. After controlling for the differences in student intake, the differences in effectiveness between public and religious schools are roughly the same as before controlling. Religious schools do not on average have a better qualified student intake, so this second explanation is not a good one for the attractiveness of religious schools.

The third explanation is the strong position of religious schools through *political protection* by the christian-democratic party, by laws protecting „free-

dom of education", and by the good administrative network of the organizations of religious schools. This explanation has some validity. The christian-democratic party's former strong position made it possible to maintain these schools despite the increased irreligiousness, and even to establish new religious schools in areas with only a low number of active church members. The problem with this political protection explanation is, however, that the Dutch system enables parents to „vote with their feet", despite all regulations and despite the strong formal position of religious schools.

Schools are financed according to the number of pupils enroled, and the way to establish a new school is to find enough parents who will send their children to that new school. Several groups of parents (orthodox-protestant, islamic, hindu) have recently used this mechanism of „voting with their feet" with success against the powerful, already established organizations of religious schools, and have founded schools of their own religious preference. The question is therefore why irreligious parents do not use the same mechanism to increase the number of non-religious schools or the number of pupils attending them. It is hard to argue that these irreligious parents are less powerful or less numerous than the orthodox-protestant, islamic or hindu parents and their organizations. Irreligious parents are on average better educated and have more links with the established political parties than orthodox-protestant, islamic or hindu parents. One can conclude from this that irreligious parents no longer feel deterred by the religious socialization of religious schools and thus do not see the need to change to non-religious schools. If this is true, the explanation of political protection is not sufficient to account for the continuing attractiveness of religious schools.

There exist differences in *educational administration* between public and religious schools (HOFMAN 1993), and they can explain some of the outcome differences, despite the enforced financial equality and strong control by the state. Not the formal differences in educational administration, but the on average stronger informal relations between board and teachers in the religious schools partially explains the better performance of their pupils and thus the attractiveness of religious schools for non-religious pupils and parents.

A fifth explanation is that irreligious parents prefer religious socialization, because they still appreciate the *religious values* to which they no longer adhere. However, it is clear from longitudinal research that the number of adherents to religious values among Dutch adults is decreasing, which is in contrast to the stability of recruitment of religious schools. Only a minority of parents (about 30 percent, depending on the local situation) gives religious reasons for choosing a religious school for their children. If the appreciation of religious values by irreligious parents were an effective explanation of their choice of a religious school, the percentage of religious reasons should be higher. However, the values-oriented character of religious schools leads them to stress secular,

non-religious values as an important aspect of schooling in the broader sense (Germans would call this *Bildung* and the French *éducation*). Public schools with their neutral status tend to avoid discussion on value-oriented topics and stress instruction instead. Irreligious parents who prefer schooling to have a broad scope rather than a more narrow instructional purpose, thus choose the modern religious school for its breadth, which they consider an aspect of educational quality, rather than for religious values.

Neither protestant nor catholic churches have a major influence any longer on the curriculum of most religious schools, and religious education has decreased to the point where it simply gives factual information on various world views (CLAASSEN 1985; ROEDE/PEETSMA/RIEMERSMA 1994). One good reason for this breakdown of religious socialization is the scarcity of teachers who are religious and willing to undertake that religious socialization. The lack of religious teachers in the Netherlands can be explained by the negative relationship between level of education and degree of traditional religiousness. A majority of pupils in religious schools do not have an active religious background and their parents do not want them be socialized into a religion to which they do not belong[6]. But they do not object to cognitive information on various world views. There is a happy conjuncture between the impossibility of religious schools to provide religious socialization and the small number of parents still wanting it. Thus, these schools offer as next best cognitive information on world views (which a teacher who is not religious can give as part of cultural socialization, although it is often still known under the old curriculum title of religious education), and non-religious parents can accept information on world views as part of cultural socialization (despite its old-fashioned title).

The forced neutrality of public schools and the secular values-oriented character of religious schools explains in part the attractiveness of the latter schools.

A sixth explanation of the attractiveness of religious schools in less religious society is their mild *educational conservatism* (on average), compared to the more progressive (on average) tendency of public schools. Although the term „conservatism" is not popular in the Netherlands[7] and „moderate progressive" is fashionable, average parents tend to avoid experiments with their own children. Public schools tend to be more progressive, both politically and educationally, and more inclined to experiment. They are thus less attractive (because educational experiments always involve the risk of failure), yet perhaps more successful in promoting the educational success of their pupils.

6 VREEBURG (1993, p. 140) estimates that in 1986 at Catholic secondary schools 45% of the pupils have no religion, 31% of the pupils go to church once a month or more and 51% sometimes visit a church. In Protestant schools 53% have no religion, 31% go to church once a month or more and 42% sometimes visit a church.

7 No serious Dutch political party uses the term conservatism.

There are four reasons for this mild educational conservatism of religious schools: distance from policy makers; more room to avoid educational reforms; fewer members of a progressive union of teachers; fewer strikes.

First, the board of public schools is the council of the municipality. These councils will favour educational experiments for political reasons (not necessarily bad ones) because education is one of the major instruments of policy makers to promote desirable developments. Boards of religious school have less direct connections with policy makers (although they are often in some indirect way connected with the more moderate political parties), and represent more parents (mostly indirectly). So they feel less need for educational experiments for political reasons.

Second, public schools have less opportunity to escape pressure from the national government because they cannot use „freedom of education" as a shield to protect themselves. Religious schools can only be obliged to conform to educational experiments if they are forced to by a national law which declares the educational experiment a quality condition necessary to qualify for subsidizing. In all other cases, religious schools must only participate in educational experiments on a voluntary basis.

Third, public-school teachers are often members of the more progressive union of teachers (ABOP), which tends to support educational experiments, while religious-school teachers usually belong to the more moderate or conservative unions, which tend to favour the status quo.

Fourth, members of the ABOP are more active in struggles for better working conditions and payment and are thus more likely to participate in strikes and other forms of industrial action, which can deter parents from choosing a public school because they are afraid their child will be a victim of these actions (even if they approve of them).

As in most European societies, regular attendance of religious services even among church members is low in the Netherlands. The Catholic and Protestant churches are not communities in which a majority of parents and pupils of religious schools participate on a regular basis. Since the *religious community* is the ultimate explanation of the positive effects on educational attainment in Catholic schools in the United States (as suggested by COLEMAN/HOFFER 1987), one would not expect output differences between public, Catholic and Protestant schools in the Netherlands.

However, LAARHOVEN et al. (1986, 1990) found clear evidence of such positive effects of Catholic and Protestant schools on secondary education. This was the first of a number of studies on differences in the effectiveness of Protestant, Catholic and public schools[8] (for a review, see DIJKSTRA 1992)[9]. These differen-

8 The effectiveness of neutral private schools has not been often systematically studied, owing to their large internal differences and relatively small number. KOOPMAN/DRONKERS (1994) found that the

ces, all adjusted for the composition of the pupils, were found only in terms of educational outcomes (drop out, degrees, attainment, etc.)[10].

If community of churches would be an important explanation of the varied appeal of different religious schools, one might expect that the secularization and irreligiousness of the Dutch society reduced the differences in educational outcome between public and religious schools.

An eighth explanation is the positive effect of a deliberate choice by parents and teachers of an „unconventional" as compared with a traditional choice, which increases the possibility of this „unconventional" school becoming a community in which pupils perform better. Depending on the deliberate educational choice of the parents and the following self-selection, both religious and public school can become a community with shared values in which pupils perform better. The *deliberate educational choice* of parents and teachers of a specific school will increase the chances that this school will become an educational community in which pupils will perform better.

De JONG and ROELEVELD (1989) found that religious, and expecially Catholic, secondary schools for junior and senior general education in Amsterdam obtained better results than comparable public schools. In the highly secularized city of Amsterdam, attending a public school is the „conventional" situation and the choice of a catholic school „unconventional". COSTONGS and DRONKERS (1989) found that public schools perform better in a region where catholic schools are the „conventional" schools. ROELEVELD and DRONKERS (1994) found that schools in districts in which neither public, protestant nor catholic schools had a majority of the pupils, the effectiveness of schools, also after controlling for pupil composition, was the highest. In these districts without a majority there is no „conventional" school choice and thus the parental choice is more deliberate. In districts in which public, protestant or catholic schools had either a very small part (<20%) or a very large part (>60%) of all pupils, the effectiveness of these schools was lower. In these district the „conventional" school choice is most common and thus the parental choice is more traditional. Other results support this deliberate educational choice explanation. The positive effects of religious schools are found only in the 1970s and 1980s, when the church was no

effectiveness of neutral private grammar schools was equal or lower to that of comparable public or religious schools, after controlling for the composition of their pupils.

9 There are indications that comparable differences between public and religious school can be found in Nordrhein-Westfalen. In a personal communication MEULEMANN/HEMSING (Universität zu Köln) report that pupils from protestant secondary schools (Schulträger) attain more often their „Abitur" than pupils from public schools, despite the lower average intelligence of pupils from protestant schools.

10 Differences in the drug-use, religious participation, reading, time spend on homework, time spend inside school and truancy between the pupils from public or religious schools were not found after controlling for the degree of personal religious involvement of the pupil (VREEBURG/DRONKERS 1995). This degree of personal religious involvement of the pupil seems to be more important then visiting of public or religious school.

longer a significant community. However, during the 1950s, when the catholic church was still a powerful community, no positive effects of religious schools were found (DRONKERS 1989). DIJKSTRA (1992) did not find any greater effectiveness in a special group of orthodox-protestant primary schools when compared to the average Dutch school during the 1980s, despite the fact that these schools belonged to one well-organized orthodox-protestant church in which all parents were active. There is also no other indication that when churches were more powerful in the Netherlands, religious schools had better outcomes than public schools. At that time, the choice of a religious or public school was not made on educational but on religious grounds. It was therefore not an indication of a particular dedication to education but that of belonging to a sub-culture. Public or religious schools were not forced to compete for pupils because religion dictated the choice of parents and teachers.

After the breakdown in the 1960s of the church as an important community, religious schools were forced to compete for pupils, because they could no longer rely on recruitment along religious lines. The deliberate educational choice of parents and teachers became important for schools. Religious schools were on average better equipped for this competition for pupils because of their history (during the 19th century, Dutch religious schools won the struggle in part on the pupil market) and because of their religious administration (more flexibility than local government; HOFMAN 1993). Perhaps public schools also lost this battle because their leading advocates expected the religious school sector to break down automatically as a consequence of the growing secularization and irreligiousness of Dutch society. The only exception to this danger of being a „conventional" school comes from the municipal gymnasiums (classical grammar schools). Although they are mostly public schools, municipal gymnasiums can avoid becoming „conventional" schools because of their long history, their unique position as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of secondary school types (which means a more selective entrance admission), and their strong relations with local and national elites.

2.3 Consequences of religious and public schools for educational inequality

As said before, the equal subsidizing of all religious and public schools has promoted the decrease in prestigious elite schools outside the state-subsidized sector. The equal financial resources of religious and public schools have prevented a creaming-off of the most able students by either the public or the religious schools. Before the 1970s, the choice of a religious or public schools was not made on educational but on religious grounds. As a consequence the existence of parental choice didn't increase educational inequality in Dutch society.

The educational differences between religious and public schools are recent and could be the start of a new form of inequality, despite all of the other efforts of the Dutch administration to diminish unequal educational opportunities. Differences between parents' knowledge of school effectiveness, which correlates with their own educational level, can perhaps be seen as the basis of this new form of inequality. The importance of the deliberate choice of parents to promote the educational opportunities of their children can explain the persistence of religious educational systems in the Netherlands as well in other European societies despite all secularization. However, even in an educational system without a religious and a public sector, this knowledge of school effectiveness by parents can operate.

Islamic schools working in the context of Dutch educational laws are a new form of religious school, although their number is not yet very large. The reasons for wanting an islamic school are comparable to those given by protestants and catholics during the „school struggle" in the 19th century. Since the laws are based on those reasons, it is difficult to refuse the establishment of islamic schools in the long run. There are three main problems with establishing such schools: the mobilization of parents, religious and cultural differences among islamic parents, and the lack of qualified islamic teachers. Another argument against islamic schools is that segregation will hamper the integration of islamic children into Dutch society. The strongest opposition to islamic schools on the basis of integration comes from advocates of public rather than protestant and catholic schools, since the integration of all religious groups into one school has always been the ideal of public schools.

On the whole, there are no indications that religious schools do produce more educational inequality then public schools, as long as these religious schools are treated in the same way by the state as the public schools and as long as the religious schools are not allowed to collect extra resources for their schools.

2.4 Costs of a system with public and religious schools

A dual (public-religious) educational system is not less expensive: KOELMAN (1987) estimated the extra costs of the Dutch system of both public and religious schools at about Gld. 631 million pro year (500 million D-Mark for primary education alone)[11]. The extra costs come from the many small schools of different sectors existing in one community, given the small minimum number of pupils necessary to maintain a school. Efforts by the government to reduce these costs are promoting larger schools by increasing the minimum number of pupils in a school. In secondary education this has led to a fusion of schools in larger

11 Such an estimation is never made for secondary or tertiary education.

units, but the mergers have been mostly within the given boundaries of public and religious schools (with a tendency to combine protestant and catholic schools into one christian school). However, in primary education this fusion movement has partially collapsed because the government could not raise the minimum number of pupils to a sufficient level. The main cause of the failure has been pressure from smaller communities, who have feared losing their only school.

In contrast to the higher cost of maintaining small schools (public or religious) are the lower overhead costs of most religious schools, who are not obliged to use the more expensive services of their municipalities but can shop around among firms to obtain the cheapest and most effective assistance for administration, repairs, building, cleaning, etc. Religious schools also use more voluntary help (owing to their more direct link with parents), which also lowers overhead costs.

A total balance-sheet of the lower overhead costs of religious schools and the higher costs of maintaining two sectors has never been agreed as the figures are disputed by all sides. My personal view is that an educational system with both public and religious schools which compete for pupils is not on the whole cheaper then an educational system with only public schools.

3. Recent debates and new initiatives

Freedom of choice has been embedded in the constitution since 1917 and has not changed since then. This constitutional base is strongly supported by the christian-democrat parties, whose support has been necessary in every government from the beginning of the 20th century until 1994[12]. A consequence of this political situation is that a major debate on the religious base of the Dutch free school choice is impossible, since it would endanger the ideological position of the christian-democratic parties and harm the opportunity of any opposition party to form a new government with them. This is not to say that there is no movement to change of the autonomy of schools and the conditions under which religious and public schools must operate.

There have been attempts by more orthodox protestants and catholics to revive their schools by reintroducing a more serious religious curriculum. In general, this orthodox attempt has failed (for catholic more than for orthodox-pro-

12 There is a coalition-government without christian-democrats since 1994, but it is to early to see a weakening of the constitutional base of the freedom of parental choice. In a recent parliamentary debate on the freedom of education, no non-christian-democrat parties questioned the freedom of parental choice but only the political protection of religious schools by the christian-democrat party.

testants, because the latter succeeded in establishing orthodox schools with a small national organization of their own), since parents preferred the less strictly religious schools, in accordance with their less religious beliefs. However, the orthodox attempt has not produced any movement of parents towards public schools and has not been supported by the national organizations for catholic and protestant schools (lobby groups directed at the central government). Nor has this attempt been supported by major political, social or cultural organizations. Any debate on the religious content of education in non-public schools tends to fall on deaf ears, because most parents are not interested in this topic and has not produced any political gains.

An other debate is that on the degree of autonomy of schools or school clusters, generally tied into the proposal to increase this autonomy. One aspect of the debate is to improve the accountability of schools including that towards parents. This debate on autonomy does not, however, affect the freedom of school choice but instead will encourage it. Another aspect of the debate is the financial accountability of schools. There is a move towards a lump-sum system which is equal for both religious and public schools. My own view is that the autonomy movement will promote the position of religious schools, who are already familiar with some autonomy, whereas public schools are not (they are admin- istrated by the municipalities, usually in a more bureaucratic way). It is questionable whether, despite all lip service, municipalities will really give more autonomy to their schools, since they would be losing an important tool of their power.

There is also some debate about a change in the governance of public schools. They are now governed by municipal councils. Proposals are being made for this to be carried out by special independent education councils or committees, more or less independent of the municipal councils. The christian-democrat party opposes the proposals because they fear this change could diminish the perceived educational advantages of religious schools. They argue that a change in the government of public schools in the direction of more autonomous institutions is against the constitution, because the government would no longer provide public education. Another fear of religious school advocates is that such a change would free the hand of the municipalities. They could then act as arbiter between public and religious schools, promote common activities for them under the auspices of the municipalities, and issue regulations (not by national law) which might affect religious schools.

Advocates of public schools have long contested this movement, foreseeing government by local municipality councils as the symbol of the public nature of their schools. Perhaps they still hoped for the collapse of the religious school in an irreligious society. They are now moving away from their opposition to the change and conceding more possibilities for municipalities to co-ordinate religious and public schools in their communities.

The new coalition government without the christian-democrats is more in favour of these proposals in the governance of public schools, but until now it has not act strongly on this point.

Especially in secondary education, there is a trend to promote large regional school clusters governed by one board. Some believe that this may help to break down the distinctions between public and religious education because fusions cannot be made within one sector. This is a covert aim or an afterthought rather than a politically stated objective. However, given the political strength of christian-democrat parties and their roots in the local communities, there is little likelihood of their actually happening. The fused school clusters which have been formed until now follow the boundaries of the public and religious schools with some blurring of the distinction between protestant and catholic schools (the establishment of christian schools).

4. Conclusion

The Dutch case shows that promoting more parental choice in education and more competition between schools for pupils can be a good way to improve the quality of teaching, to decrease the level of bureaucracy in and around schools and to reduce the costs within schools. The Dutch case also shows that it is possible to strike a fair balance between the parental freedom of school choice and the aims of a national educational policy. It assumes however the equal subsidizing and treatment of public and religious schools by the state. Advocates of a strong market orientation and the absence of the state in education tend to forget these important conditions of equal treatment and subsidizing. If one forgets these conditions, the introduction of religious schools will produce less quality of teaching for the average pupil, more educational inequality and a less balanced provision of societally relevant education. A balanced combination of the forces of the market and the state produces a better education for a larger part of the population than a reliance on either the state or the market. In the latter case the missing counter-balances against the inevitable negative aspects of either a powerful state or a almighty market will always produce a suboptimal result.

The Dutch case also shows that religious school can flourish in irreligious societies, not because of their religious socialisation, but because of their greater opportunities they offer to parents some educational conservatism for their children, a more secular value-oriented education and a stronger school community. Irreligious parents prefer these additional benefits of religious schools, despite some religious socialisation that comes along with them, in order to counter the negative aspects of the growing individualisation in modern societies.

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