SUMMARY

This article offers a survey of the religious consciousness of Dutch secondary school students. From an educational point of view, this survey is understood as a description of the actual, initial situation of the student population that the contemporary religious educator faces. Against the background of this survey, the question is raised, therefore, what can still be a legitimate, general goal of religious education in school given the fact that these students hardly have any affinity with any religious tradition anymore. In order to provide an answer to this question, three concepts of religious education are discussed: education in religion, education about religion and education from religion. However, on the basis of empirical data and a number of pedagogical and theological minimum requirements, it is concluded, then, that none of these concepts offers a sufficient basis for religious education in school today. As a result, an alternative conception of religious education, which focuses on the formation of a personal religious identity, is presented as a possible and viable concept for religious education in the future.

1. Introduction

In most religious-sociological analyses of the developments in Western societies in general and Dutch society in particular, the phenomenon of secularization is at the centre. For analyses based on empirical material we refer the reader to, amongst others, the European research of values (Ester et al. 1993), research by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (Becker & Vink 1994; Becker & De Wit 2000), the ‘God in the Netherlands studies’ carried out under the authority of the Dutch Catholic broadcasting company KRO (Dekker, De Hart & Peters 1997) and the SOCON research (social-cultural developments in the Netherlands) by the department of sociology of the Catholic University of Nijmegen (Eisenga et al. 1992a; 1992b). Although the concept of secularization – to be interpreted as the process of secularization – is used in many ways and can therefore easily lead to misunderstandings, the concept has proved its significance nonetheless. In general it means a reduction of involvement in a transcendental reality, causing both social and personal reality to become gradually disenchanted, desecrated and stripped of the traces of God (Van der Ven 1993). More detailed approaches distinguish between secularization on a macro, meso and micro level.
On a macro level secularization means a liberation of subsystems such as politics, labour, health care, science and education that withdraw from the umbrella influence of church and faith. The subsystem of religion now finds itself next to the other subsystems and is no longer the foundation. From this process of institutional differentiation arise autonomous institutions with their own frameworks of meaning. On a meso level it means that the subsystem of religion has to compete with other institutions and thus loses in plausibility. This may lead to an adjustment of religion to the surrounding culture. Dobbellaire (1978, 1981) calls this religious change or internal secularization. On a micro level secularization is related to a change in the religious consciousness and the religious behaviour of the individual, gradually offering less room for the pious, sacred or transcendental. This is followed by a detachment from the institution of the church and a reduction in participation in the rituals offered by this institution.

As far as Dutch society is concerned, the overall conclusion of the above-mentioned analyses is that there was first a gradual secularization, which has accelerated since 1965 – 1970. The latest data on this matter are supplied by the studies ‘God in the Netherlands’-1966-1996’ (Dekker, De Hart & Peters 1997) and ‘Secularization in the nineties’ by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (Becker & De Wit 2000). During the nineties the growth of the non-denominational tendency continued. In 1999, 63% of the Dutch considered themselves to be non-denominational (Becker & De Wit 2000). Earlier the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau had already made calculations in advance for the year 2020 and had predicted a denominational tendency of 27% (Becker & Vink 1994). There is also a decline in church attendance. In 1966, 50% of the Dutch taking part in the research, were still regular church-goers. In 1996 this had dropped to 21% (Dekker, De Hart & Peters 1997). Furthermore, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau reports that the social influence of the churches is restricted to the approval of church viewpoints regarding general social matters, such as poverty and discrimination. However, the public no longer tolerates any church interference in private life.

We also come across secularization on a micro level in a reduced acceptance of central Christian dogmas. Faith in a God who concerns himself personally with every human being dropped from 47% in 1966 to 24% in 1996 and is replaced by a vague faith in transcendancy and a growing agnosticism. The statement ‘Christ is the Son of God or has been sent by God’ was accepted by 59% in 1966 and by merely 39% in 1996 (Dekker, De Hart & Peters 1997). The Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau, however, does report a new trend. Faith in life after death, in heaven and miracles is not dropping any further, but is even improving slightly. Still, these views could easily fit in other transcendent-al systems other than the Christian one.