This article explores the moral consciousness of Dutch secondary school students. It focuses on the question how teleological and deontological considerations function in processes of moral decision-making? Do young people especially refer to teleological considerations when asked to pass a moral judgment or to deontological considerations? Or do they refer to both? Analyses of the judgments passed by the students with regard to three bio-medical, moral dilemmas show that especially the latter is the case. In order to arrive at a considered judgment, the students are constantly balancing between the ideal of the good life and the moral norm. In this way, the students' moral reasoning displays what is often referred to as practical wisdom or phronesis. Furthermore, there also appears to be a positive relationship between the students' moral consciousness and certain religious characteristics. But at the level of content this appears to be a very specific relationship. That is to say, religious students especially tend to approach moral problems from a deontological perspective.

1. Introduction

Western Europe has fallen into moral decay. This at least seems to be the common opinion of a vast majority of the older generations when they address the issue of the moral consciousness of young people. In this respect, references are often made to diverse themes such as the increase in juvenile crime, growing violence in schools and on the streets, alcohol and drugs abuse among youngsters, the high rate of teen-age pregnancies and so on. No doubt these are serious matters, which we do not want to dismiss as unimportant or exaggerated. We are inclined to wonder, however, whether these issues really are illustrative of a moral decay on the part of present-day people? In the Netherlands, for instance, certain politicians and policy-makers of Christian parties and parties of the Right often refer to the fact, that the majority of adolescents, as well as adults (!), no longer abides by the morality of the Decalogue, but is becoming more permissive especially in matters of sexuality and bio-ethics (Halman 1991, 71-79). The shift towards greater permissiveness is also accompanied, at least in the Netherlands, by a decrease in civic morality; i.e. civic virtues such as honesty, integrity and abiding by the law becoming less important (Ester et al. 1993, 60-61). But can one so readily equate greater moral permissiveness with moral decay? Does
the fact that people become more permissive automatically imply, that they are also acting irresponsible? Does it mean that they hardly pay attention to moral issues anymore or no longer make conscious, moral judgments? The aforementioned issues are serious matters, but the increase in crime rates, for instance, can also be explained by economic and social factors rather than by moral permissiveness alone. Hence, before concluding that young people are suffering from moral decay, a more profound insight into the moral consciousness of youngsters is needed. Accordingly, one of the aims of the research reported in this article is to deepen our understanding of the moral consciousness of present-day young people.

However, being practical theologians, we are not interested only in the moral consciousness as such of young people, but would also like to focus on the relationship between the moral and the religious domain. Under the influence of the Enlightenment and modernity, morality has become an independent cultural sphere dissociated from religion: a development that can be valued very differently by different observers. From a sociological point of view, for example, scholars like Habermas (1985) value this process very positively, since such a dissociation makes possible an autonomous and rational moral judgement. From a theological point of view, however, this dissociation appears problematic. In a recent attempt to design a theological anthropology, especially in light of fundamental educational issues, Fraas (2000) claims exactly the opposite, stating that religion and morality cannot be separated from one another. The essence of religious faith, Fraas argues, is a personal relationship with God. But this relationship with God, which is indicative of human life ("You are redeemed"), at the same time entails the imperative to live accordingly ("Act as a redeemed human being"). As Fraas (2000, 110) puts it, the divine-human relationship can only be realized by way of man's relationship with his fellow men and fellow creatures. The praxis of the Christian faith, therefore, necessarily reveals a moral dimension. This 'theological norm', as expressed by Fraas, is something we want to take seriously. For this reason, we do not confine ourselves to a description of the moral consciousness as such of young people, but also look at how this moral consciousness may possibly relate to certain religious characteristics.

In order to study the moral consciousness of young people, two methods are basically possible. The first method is to inquire after moral attitudes in a rather general way independent from concrete moral problems. The second method is to confront respondents with concrete moral problems and to ask them to pass concrete moral judgments. The first method, for example, was adopted in the European values study (EVS; Halman 1991; Ester et al 1993) and the study of social and cultural trends in the Netherlands (SOCON; Eisenga et al. 1992a; 1992b) conducted by the Departments of Sociology at the Catholic University of Tilburg and the Catholic University of Nijmegen respectively. Studies which resulted in a profound insight into a series of moral, and also religious, values adolescents and adults in the Netherlands and Western Europe hold. The second method, of course, was adopted by Kohlberg (1981; 1984), who on the basis of