In any research on the relationship between religion and nationalism, a nation’s education system deserves special attention. It is in schools, particularly primary schools, that religious and national values are handed over to a new generation. The present paper focuses on the life and work of Petrus Hofstede de Groot (1806-1882), who was an influential man in the Netherlands of his time, not only in the field of theology and church, but also in that of the primary school system. His efforts for the Christian education of the Dutch nation give a good idea of the close relationship between religion and nationalism that existed in the Netherlands in the mid-nineteenth century.

Around 1830, about 68% of Dutch children attended some primary school or other. By far the largest part attended non-denominational public primary schools. At that time the Dutch population was a little over 2.6 million. The dominant religious group was the Protestant (59%), of which the Reformed group formed the main part (55%); the rest consisted of Lutherans, Mennonites and Remonstrants (Dutch Arminians). The other main group was that of the Catholics, of which the Roman Catholics formed by far the largest part (39%); the members of the Dutch separatist Jansenist Church (known after 1870 as the Old Catholic Church) formed the rest (0.2%). Compared with the Protestant group the Roman Catholics formed a minority at that time,
not only in figures but also socially and culturally. About 1.8% of the population was Jewish. Jews had their own schools in the larger towns. The Southern provinces, adjacent to Belgium, were almost entirely Roman Catholic (North-Brabant 88%, Limburg 98%). In the Northern provinces the Catholics formed a small minority; in the Province of Groningen, for instance, they made up 7.4% of the population.

When the Republic of the seven United Netherlands was established at the end of the sixteenth century, the Reformed Church had become predominant; it supervised, for instance, the primary school system, which was regulated by provincial ordinances. This situation changed radically after the Batavian Revolution of 1795. In 1796 the National Assembly decided: '...a predominant church shall no longer be tolerated in the Netherlands'. All the denominations in the unitary state that had replaced the federalist structure of the old Republic were accorded an equal status by law. The national Education Act of 1806 reflected this new situation. Now education was State-supervised by means of school inspectors. Primary schools, designed for the education of the politically and culturally mute masses, had to educate according to 'all social and Christian virtues'; 'doctrinal' education was not permitted. In actual practice this meant that exclusive Reformed education was replaced by a Christian, and broadly speaking a Protestant form.

The 1806 Act was drawn up entirely according to the ideas of the Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen (the Society for Public Welfare, generally called the Nut), which was founded in 1784 by a Mennonite minister. From its inception, this Christian society, which united the enlightened part of the nation, had strived to improve the country's educational system. The Nut published books on educational subjects; its local departments founded primary schools and training schools for schoolteachers.

Shortly after the Education Act was passed, the Batavian Republic was replaced by the Kingdom of Holland under a brother of Napoleon; the Netherlands were later incorporated into the French Empire. In 1813, however, the country once more gained independence under King William I of the House of Orange, a son of the last Stadholder of the Dutch Republic. In 1814 the new-born state was enlarged to include the predominantly Catholic province of Belgium, which had had alliances with the North for about forty years in the sixteenth century.

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4 J.A. de Kok, Nederland op de breuklijn Rome-Reformatie (Assen, 1964), 292ff.