

**NETHERLANDS, THE, HUMANIST EDUCATION IN.**

The Netherlands is one of the most secular societies in the Western world. Half of the Dutch are atheists or agnostics (see NETHERLANDS, THE, UNBELIEF IN). Humanism is accepted constitutionally as an alternative LIFE STANCE with equal status to any of the theistic religions, including the right to found state-funded humanist schools. The humanist movement in the Netherlands is one of the strongest in the world: 40 percent of all Dutch adults identify themselves as humanists, and 17 percent of all Dutch pupils attend humanist education (see below) in pluralist (public) schools (see NETHERLANDS, THE, HUMANISM IN).

The Dutch humanist movement has always been in favor of pluralist schools attended by pupils of different life stances. No religion is imposed upon others, and information about various life stances is taught as objectively as possible. Pluralist education is not value neutral, because it recognizes that values play an important role in daily life. Students are encouraged to give meaning and shape to their lives in a nondogmatic and tolerant way.

Though the Dutch humanist movement was legally able to found humanist schools, it chose not to do so out of concern that life stance-based schools might become dogmatic and indoctrinate children in their parents' philosophy of life. From a humanist perspective, children are not the possession of their parents but only of themselves. This implies that parents and educators have to guide children in such a way that they are increasingly empowered to create their own lifestyles. This human right to self-determination is so fundamental that children should understand it at an early age. Humanists support this process by offering optional humanist education classes as an alternative to the similarly optional religious education classes already offered in a pluralist school system.

The Dutch school system implements the separation of church and state, but does offer parents and children the choice of optional humanist or religion education during set hours in pluralist schools. Humanist educators conduct humanist education classes under the jurisdiction of Dutch humanist organizations. Optional religious education is taught under the jurisdiction of the various churches, mosques, and synagogues. All life stance education is supervised by school inspectors. Mandatory education in factual knowledge on all important life stances is the responsibility of the pluralist schools in the Netherlands. By this division of jurisdictions, the Dutch state can guarantee the separation of church and state and at the same time offer an opportunity to give life stance-based education within constitutional limits to those who want it.

In the past, many humanists assumed that education in itself guaranteed the development of an ethically responsible world. Their assumption was that spreading knowledge was equivalent to spreading ethical awareness. In

reality, what happened instead is that theocracy tended to be replaced by technocracy. Democracy is more than spreading information freely. It demands the concrete training of individuals' capacity to give meaning and shape to life. In the battle between theocracy and technocracy, humanists defend democracy. Ethical education is therefore essential.

Science is a necessary but insufficient condition for humanist education. Most Dutch humanist educators do not believe in the dogma of scientific and economic "progress" as a natural law, though this does not mean that they oppose progress as such. While many Dutch humanist educators would describe themselves as postmodern in their viewpoints, postmodernism is not monolithic. We must distinguish between at least two types: antimodernism and neomodernism. Antimodernism assumes that all science is bad; its clarion call of "back to nature" means the elimination of human values as basic principles. In contrast, neomodernism incorporates nature without making it sacred, recognizing that we are free and responsible to give meaning to our existence. Neomodernism embraces the best of the Renaissance and Enlightenment (see ENLIGHTENMENT, UNBELIEF DURING THE) with their humanistic traditions of self-determination.

In Dutch humanist education, the ideals of the French and American revolutions play an important role. Freedom is not considered to be the absence of rules but rather the presence of self-determination. Equality does not mean uniformity but rather equal access to human rights by all people. Solidarity is not imposed but rather seen as the consequence of implementing self-determination: the concept of enlightened self-interest. Freedom is frequently misinterpreted as the right to discriminate against others, whereas equality implies the right not to be discriminated against. This dilemma can only be solved by a principle higher than freedom or equality. That higher principle is self-determination.

Self-determination means the right to give meaning and shape to one's own life as long as others are not prohibited from exercising their own rights to self-determination. More practical than the concepts of freedom and equality, the principle of self-determination is able to settle tensions among individuals and between minorities. It is very understandable why the Dutch people chose to incorporate this principle as the leading concept guiding their constitution. The Netherlands has a long tradition of dealing with religious, ethnic, and other minorities, and most Dutch are aware of the fact that they themselves belong to various minorities. When all citizens recognize their minority status and their need for minority rights, they will become more sensitive in defending minority rights for everyone else so long as others are not harmed. This awareness can help to guarantee a true pluralist democracy.

This tolerant perspective has faced a new challenge with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Nether-

lands. Should democracies be so tolerant as to allow intolerant activities? Democracy is not the dictatorship of the majority, but the implementation of the right to self-determination. Fundamentalist parties that seek to take over power in order to end democracy should therefore not be tolerated in democratic elections. But it is a mistake to think that all Muslims are fundamentalists. Most Dutch Muslims are not; indeed, the Netherlands has a long liberal Islamic past in its former colony, Indonesia (see INDONESIA AND SOME OTHER ISLAMIC COUNTRIES, UNBELIEF IN). By excluding Islamic religious education from neutral public schools, as in France, one creates a vacuum that fundamentalists can easily exploit. By allowing optional Islamic religious education under the same human rights-based democratic conditions in pluralist schools, we support the integration of minorities in society.

We could speak of an integration paradox. By excluding religious education from neutral public schools we create a vacuum that supports segregating fundamentalist tendencies. By including religious education in public schools without making it optional, we violate the rights of nonbelievers such as humanists. By integrating both religious and humanist education in an optional way in pluralist schools we prevent both theocratic and technocratic tendencies and strengthen democracy. In fact, many pupils of Islamic background make a free choice for humanist education in Dutch pluralist schools. Comparing the Netherlands with Northern Ireland, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia, one can understand the importance of life stance-pluralist education for human rights-based democracy.

The Dutch humanist movement implements these principles in daily life in a practical and pragmatic way. Practical humanism assumes that people act according to their own life stance based upon self-determination. The task of the humanist movement is not to attack religions but to create a positive alternative to theism. Humanists try to guide people in such a way that they will be as free and as responsible as possible. In the Netherlands about 400 humanists are educating young people in humanist life stance and life styles. Over 250 humanist professionals are counseling people in hospitals, prisons, and the army in finding solutions to their existential problems. Some twenty journalists present humanist ideas to the general public through humanist media, including the Humanist Broadcasting Company. More than ten professors are now employed full time in humanist studies, taking responsibility for the training of humanist professionals in various universities all over the country. In addition, the state-funded University for Humanistics in Utrecht has eight professors and more than three hundred students who are trained as humanist professionals in counseling, education, research, and related fields. And the *Journal for Humanistics* gives the necessary professional information and guidance.