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# CONFIRMATION WORK IN EUROPE: EMPIRICAL RESULTS, EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

A Comparative Study in Seven Countries

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## Preface

This volume contains the results of the first international-comparative empirical study on confirmation work in seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland). It is the result of an extensive international collaboration between researchers from these countries. Through this, it has become possible to put together the experiences with research on youth and religion as well as on young people's relationship to institutionalised forms of Christianity that previously have only been available at a national level.

Doing justice to the national histories and situations as well as to the many differences between the countries and Churches involved, the confirmation work in each of the countries is described theoretically and empirically in parallel chapters, with information about the current situation as well as about the different models of confirmation work and practical experiences. Comparative chapters focus on core questions of confirmation work, concerning didactic issues and methods but also the meaning of confirmation work for church and society at large. Readers with limited time will find a brief summary of the main results in part 5. The tables with the detailed results are printed only partly in the respective chapters of the book. A complete list of results for all countries involved can be found in the appendix.

The approach of the study follows the insights of contemporary education as well as recent developments in theology and the Churches. It pursues the interest in pupil-oriented learning that treats young people not as objects but as active and creative subjects. This is why the study is based, in the first place, on interviews with the confirmands themselves. Moreover, since confirmation work has turned into a major field for volunteers, it also includes the workers – ministers as well as others. In addition to this, at least in some of the countries, the parents were addressed as well.

The present volume is part of the emerging field of international comparative research in the field of religious and Christian education. Through this, the book opens up new horizons for thinking about confirmation work. It raises questions that go beyond the traditional national contexts and offers innovative perspectives for the praxis and theory of confirmation work in Europe. In this respect, the study can also be seen as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue. By

bringing together data from seven countries or Churches it allows for mutual understanding and for learning from each other in new ways.

The book is written by a team of authors from all of the participating countries who have created the *International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work* founded in 2007. It is based on an empirical study with more than 28000 adolescents, parents and workers, most of whom answered questionnaires at two points in time. This empirical basis places it on the level of the largest studies available in this field. Throughout the study, the researchers have followed the most current standards of social scientific research, aiming for representative data and valid procedures. The ample interpretations, however, also make reference to theological insights and to the discussions on the Church as well as on the tasks of Christian education.

*The Editors*

# Introduction

# 1. Introduction

FRIEDRICH SCHWEITZER, WOLFGANG ILG, AND HENRIK SIMOJOKI

This volume presents the results of the first international empirical study on confirmation work in seven European countries. Its international character as well as its empirical methodology make this study an innovative contribution not only for the practise of working with confirmands but also for the research on young people in Europe. Participating countries are Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland (Zurich). Religious educators and researchers from universities and research institutes of the Protestant Churches in these countries have formed an international network – the *International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work* – in order to carry out this collaborative study and to have an institutional basis for future work. The seven countries are not the only countries in Europe or around the world where confirmation work plays an important role. Other countries or Churches, for example, in Hungary or Iceland or even in the United States could have been included as well – an idea that was not realized because the study would have become too large. Moreover, the seven participating countries or Churches represent an area where confirmation work is of special interest, traditionally but also in the present.

The focus of this publication is confirmation work with young people. More specifically, we are interested in the expectations and experiences of the adolescent participants but also of those who are responsible for such programmes, as pastors or other full-time workers of the Church but also as volunteers. Confirmation work is a vital field of educational activities that the Protestant Churches make available to young people. Increasingly, at least in theory and in the official guidelines, the participants are considered not the objects of this work but as active subjects who share the responsibility for shaping the programmes. In this respect, the present study is closely related to an ongoing renewal of confirmation work that is taking place in most of the participating countries. Through this, the traditional models based on the idea of instruction are giving way to more open and flexible forms of working together with young people by forming partnerships between the generations – a process that, according to our findings, has been successful at least to some degree. We are interested in finding out about possibilities for making the programmes even more attractive to young people.

While our focus is clearly on confirmation work and while the book will consequently be primarily of interest to those who are in charge of this work,

our study can also be of interest to other audiences. The following aspects can give readers a better idea of what the study has to offer:

- Our primary concern is about how the Churches are working with young people, specifically in the context of confirmation. In this sense, our study is about Christian youth work, not in the narrow sense of this term that only applies to certain organisations but in a broad sense that also includes working with confirmands. Traditionally, preparation for confirmation and Christian youth work were two different fields. In our understanding, the connections and parallels between these fields make it necessary to consider them together. Consequently, our results should be of interest to all those who are interested in youth work and in the relationship between the church and young people as well.
- With its emphasis on young people's expectations and experiences in relationship to programmes offered for confirmands roughly between the ages of 13 and 15 years, our study also contributes to the more general research on religious attitudes in adolescence, especially in relationship to the Church or institutionalised religion. In many of the countries involved, confirmands account for a great proportion of the respective age cohort. Therefore our results also offer insights into the worldviews of young people in general.
- The responses of the pastors and of the other workers responsible for the programmes in preparation for confirmation included in our study allow for insights into how institutionalised religion presents itself to young people and to their parents or, to put it in a more general manner, into the intergenerational dynamics of institutionalised meaning systems.
- The inclusion of volunteers in our study relates it to the research on volunteerism and on the motives or preconditions of social commitment in society.
- With its international scope, the study contributes to the emerging field of international comparative research in religious education.

While these interests form the theoretical backbone of the present volume and will be addressed throughout the various parts and chapters, we have organised the book itself along the lines of its main theme – confirmation work as it can be found in the participating countries.

In this introduction, we want to give readers some general information on confirmation, point out the wider background of our research and describe the rationale of our study, including our research questions.

## 1.1 What is Confirmation and Confirmation Work?

Confirmation and the preparation for confirmation are often seen as a core characteristic of the Protestant Churches. And indeed, as the present study shows, they play an important role for the Protestant Churches in all seven countries that participate in this study. This is not only true for Church officials or pastors but also for the adolescents and their parents as well as for the many thousands of volunteers who are involved with this programme in most of the countries. Today, about 500000 adolescents per year participate in confirmation in the seven countries of the present study. Participation rates are very high, in some countries up to 90% of the adolescents of the total population. In most of the countries, it is the majority of Protestant youth living there.

Historically, confirmation goes back to the baptismal rites of the early Church. It then was part of the rites that were conducted in the immediate context of baptism itself. Confirmation was not practised separately. Only with time, during the Middle Ages, confirmation turned into a separate ritual of its own and took on sacramental meaning. Until today, confirmation is one of the sacraments in the Catholic Church. It was this meaning as a sacrament that Reformation theologians like Martin Luther could not accept. In their view, there is no biblical basis for this understanding. Only baptism and the Lord's Supper have been accepted as sacraments in the Protestant tradition; the Catholic confirmation rites were rejected and discontinued.

The main aim of the Protestant reformers was that all members of the Church should understand the Christian faith. The faith of the Church was no longer considered sufficient. This is why catechetical instruction, most often based on Luther's catechism or on the Reformed Heidelberg catechism, was introduced. Already in the sixteenth century, individual reformers, most of all Martin Bucer of Strasburg, also introduced a new ritual that came at the end of this instruction – the rite of confirmation that included catechetical elements as well as a personal blessing. Bucer is often called the father of confirmation. Yet in many places, depending on the country and on the region, confirmation was actually not introduced as a general rite before the eighteenth century. The decisive influence for this general break-through came from two directions, from Pietism as a movement of Christian awakening and from the Enlightenment with its impulses for individual maturity and autonomy.

Ever since, participation rates have remained high in the respective Churches and countries, even if the theological understandings have changed repeatedly. In the countries participating in the present study, the last 50 years have been an important period of renewal for confirmation work. The term itself – confirmation work instead of instruction or catechesis – refers to these changes. The



basic model no longer is some kind of dated teaching and rote learning but is much closer to the ideas of youth work, with creative methods, pupil-oriented, and with possibilities for active participation. The typical age of the participating adolescents – called confirmands – is about 14 or 15 years. In the past, confirmation work used to be the sole task of the minister. In the meantime, others have come to share this responsibility, full-time workers as well as volunteers of all ages but mostly younger people under 25 years. This is why we speak of workers as the group of those responsible for confirmation work.

The duration of confirmation work varies from country to country. Yet in any case, the common effort is to have enough time for serious work and for a prolonged introduction to the faith and life of the Church for the younger generation. In addition to the Christian content, this is one of the characteristics that distinguish the Protestant confirmation from so-called secular rites of passage that are organised, among others, by Humanist associations especially in eastern Germany or in Norway.

One of the questions pursued in the present study is how far the efforts of renewing and of modernising confirmation work have been successful. In any case, it can be said that confirmation work is a very intensive educational programme that reaches more young people than any other programme outside of mandatory schooling.

## 1.2 The Background of Our Study: The Changing Place of Religion and Confirmation Work in Society

In most countries of the Western world, one of the recurring themes of public and academic debates has been the role of religion in »modern society« or, more recently, in »postmodern society«. Especially since the early twentieth century, many observers have been concerned about what they perceived as the dwindling of religious influence, especially on adolescents. In their interpretations of this challenging situation, most analysts, in the social sciences but also in theology, made use of the theory of secularisation. In fact, this theory can be called one of the most widespread explanatory tools for the interpretation of religion in modern society during most of the twentieth century.

For religious education, secularisation has an additional meaning that goes beyond the more general effects of cultural and social change. In many of the countries involved in the present study, the twentieth century also was the time when the legal separation between church and state took place. One of the immediate effects of this separation was the transformation of school religious education that has turned into a subject related less and less to a sponsoring

Church. Even if there are differences in the legal regulations concerning religion in the different countries – some of them still have something like a state church – and even if the involvement of the Churches with school Religious Education has continued after the separation between church and state in some of the countries, there can be no doubt that the distance between the state school and the Churches has grown markedly throughout Europe. Consequently, the school no longer fulfils the task of introducing young people to the Church, especially not in terms of personal encounters or experiences, of liturgical participation and introduction to the sacraments.

More recently however, the theory of secularisation has lost much of its credibility. Many social scientists no longer consider this theory »academically useful« (Luhmann 2000, 278), some even prefer to speak of »deseccularization« (Berger 1999) or of a »postsecular time« (Habermas 2001, Ziebertz/Riegel 2008) and of a »return of religion« (Riesebrodt 2000) in order to characterise the contemporary religious situation or landscape. Still others challenge such notions because they doubt that religion has ever been absent (Joas 2004, 122-128). Even those who have been in favour of the theory of secularisation (Pollack 2003) agree that the scope of this theory is limited and that a loss of religion cannot be expected equally for all parts of social life. In any case, the current situation presents itself much too multi-layered and multi-faceted for making it fit with only one theoretical concept. The religious attitudes of young people in Western societies appear to be influenced by religious pluralism and by individualisation, by privatisation but also by the new public role that the religions have come to play, be it in terms of ethical and political involvement (Casanova 1994) or in terms of political conflicts often of a global scale. In short: it has become quite difficult to forecast the future of religion. This difficulty is one of the reasons why empirical studies on particular topics and specific aspects – like confirmation work – have gained in importance while more general theories like secularisation theory have lost much of their influence.

Yet while the future of religion most likely looks much brighter than the widespread expectations of an irrevocable process of secularisation or loss of religion would have it, it is also easy to see that the work of the Churches has not become easier. This is especially true for their work with adolescents. The expected return of religion does certainly not imply a revitalization of the Churches. The renewal of the interest in religion does not imply a similar interest in formal church membership. An increase in personal religion or – to use the term which, due to another turn of the present time, is becoming more and more common – a new openness for spirituality does not bring about a turn towards institutionalised religion and the Churches. This is another reason why educational programmes like confirmation work that intentionally introduce young people to the Church, have gained additional importance.

Yet confirmation work does not only matter to the Churches. Religious pluralisation and individualisation also have consequences for society at large. There are several reasons for this. First, religion has always been a source for values because religions shape our understanding of the world as well as our understanding of social relationships. The Churches as well as so-called independent Christian associations have been very effective in nurturing the motivation for voluntary activities and the commitment to the welfare of others or even to the common good. It is difficult to imagine that individualised forms of religion that are not connected to any institution or that tend towards an avoidance of formal association and membership altogether, have the same effect in this direction. As the data from our study presented in this volume indicate, confirmation work is an important field for young people to learn about the meaning and potentials of such work. Moreover, it gives them a chance to become volunteers themselves after confirmation. Yet voluntary work is not the only result of confirmation work in respect to society. The second reason for society to be interested in confirmation work has to do with the tenuous nature of shared values. In societies with a high degree of individualisation, common values tend to become scarce. Christian youth work is one of the few places where a continued and systematically oriented encounter with a clear value basis can take place across different segments of the population, for example, across the dividing lines of social background and educational tracking. Moreover, it provides adolescents with the opportunity to encounter people who have a clear personal commitment and to engage in discussions on issues like social justice.

Since we consider it important to make the contribution of confirmation work to society more well known and more visible, we have included a special chapter on civil society (cf. chapter 4.7). This will give us the opportunity to further pursue the questions concerning the ways in which confirmation work supports values and orientations of the common good.

The changing shape of confirmation work and the growing awareness of its meaning for society at large also correspond to changes in theology and in the Churches. This is not the place to review the international discussion in theology or to consider different theological positions. However, two changes concerning theology and the church are of special importance in the present context and readers should at least be aware of their general direction. The first change concerns what can be called a new appreciation of the needs and personal interests of individual church members in general and of young people in particular. The data reported in the present volume indicate that there is a growing openness in church and theology for the questions and views of the individual believers. Traditional dogmatics and the church as an institution no longer are the decisive starting points for thinking about confirmation work.

While confirmation work remains an important access to the church for young people, the task of confirmation work is not understood as adapting young people to the church. Instead, at least in some ways, the church is willing to adapt itself to the younger generation. In any case, the relationship between the church and the faith of the church on the one hand and the younger generation on the other must be dialogical. This corresponds to a theological understanding of the church as an institution for the people, with the purpose of supporting them in their faith. This understanding also implies a new openness for pluralism not only in society but also within the church itself.

This point of view is also in line with the role of the church in relationship to the state and to society, after the separation of state and church which is the second change to be considered here. The state Churches of the past often tended to act like bureaucratic state agencies. They defined their relationship to the people by applying set rules and routine procedures. Compared to this kind of institution, the Churches of today are trying to be much closer to the people and to their needs. The shape of contemporary confirmation work clearly reflects this new understanding of the church.

The separation between church and state has additional implications that are of importance for confirmation work. Sometimes the church is now considered as part of the private sphere, just like religion is often treated as a purely private matter in modern society. For confirmation work, this would imply that it should be seen as a private activity as well. From a theological point of view, such a privatisation of confirmation and confirmation work would, however, not be acceptable. Not only would it overlook the fact that confirmation work does contribute to civil society and to the maintenance of a value basis for society at large. It would also be in tension with the understanding of the public nature of the Christian faith itself. The Protestant tradition has always emphasised that this faith should be accessible publicly and that it should also be allowed to find its public expression, in the ethical field no less than in the life orientations of the people. This is why we consider it important to maintain the claim to the public meaning and importance of confirmation work.

### 1.3 The Need for Empirical Research on Confirmation Work

The social and religious changes referred to in the previous sections entail a number of reasons for empirical research on confirmation work. This work is itself part of the changing religious landscape and, consequently, it is of interest in terms of the forms of the religion transmitted there. Neither the traditional forms of doctrine nor the traditional assumptions of wholesale secularisation

are likely to yield a sufficient picture. Pluralisation and individualisation make it necessary to find out about the forms of religion that are actually realised, for example, in confirmation work.

As pointed out above, the need for empirical research also results from changes in theology and the church, in education and religious education. For the present purposes, a common theme of these changes is of special importance. There is widespread agreement in all these respects that the individual person – the child, the learner as a subject – must play a much more central role than in the past. This is especially easy to see in religious education, including theories and conceptualisations of confirmation work. In the past, this work consisted almost exclusively in the transmission of a Christian understanding in the sense of catechetical knowledge as a unidirectional process. As mentioned above, rote learning used to be its main characteristic, and this understanding corresponded to a view of the church as an authority and as an institution into which the individual person should be incorporated and to which he or she had to comply. In recent times, the emphasis has become quite different, at least in most of the countries. Instead of incorporation and compliance, the leading ideal has now become a church and a faith that can support the individual person's own ways of finding meaning in life and of finding their way in life. This is even true for countries where the aims of enculturation and socialisation continue to play an important role. The so-called children's theology or the theology of the child is a good example for the new openness for children and youth (cf. Schweitzer 2005, Bucher 2002, Sagberg 2008). It is obvious that such approaches inherently entail the need for empirical research. Confirmation work will hardly be able to accommodate the needs and orientations of today's children and youth without making use of the insights offered by empirical research.

While many theories of religious education have come to at least include this perspective of the central importance of the individual person which may also be seen as a heritage of the Protestant tradition with its emphasis on individual faith, it should not be overlooked that there also are approaches geared to the institutional or communal aspects of Christian faith and also to the role of the contents of the Christian tradition in its integrity. Yet it is easy to see that, given the contemporary situation of religion, even more traditional approaches do not escape the need for empirical research. Since it cannot be presupposed anymore that institutional affiliation and content will actually be accepted by young people, the effects of confirmation work have to be evaluated empirically. The need for empirical work does not ensue only from a liberal theology but also makes sense to a more conservative point of view. This is not to say that different theological positions within the church have lost their meaning and influence – which would clearly be a mistaken assumption – but the effects of

the social and religious changes described above are a challenge to the Churches on the whole, not only to certain groups within the Churches.

Even if we cannot go into the details here, it should be clear that the changes in theology, the church, and in confirmation work also correspond to changes in education. It is probably fair to say that the schools in all countries participating in the present study have come to follow an approach that is much more child-centered and learner-oriented than was the case before the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. More recent developments have added to this by including, for example, didactical approaches based on constructivism. According to this understanding, learning always proceeds by way of individual constructions of reality. Consequently, the traditional models of transmission and inculcation have lost much of their influence.

However, education has not become a purely subjective matter. While child-oriented approaches have gained in influence, other tendencies have clearly become more influential as well. Especially in recent years, educational testing and the interest in the actual results or outcomes of teaching and learning have turned into hallmarks of contemporary schooling. In this respect, the objective demands on education as defined by society and, even more so, by the economy set benchmarks for teaching and learning.

Another new phenomenon in this context is the introduction of evaluation. As individual schools have become more independent in their ways of working with their students and of adapting to local or regional needs and potentials, they have also become subject to evaluation processes aiming at the maintenance of common educational standards. The introduction of special agencies for standards in education in many countries illustrates this development quite well. Evaluation in education also is associated with new ideals like transparency and responsibility and with quality control or reporting to the public.

Confirmation work is part of the Churches' work and, consequently, not attached to the educational activities of the state or to the state school. The demands of the government do not apply to confirmation work. Yet it is easy to understand that the educational work of the church will always be perceived within the general educational climate of a society. Therefore confirmation work is not exempt from the demands of learner-centeredness and also not from those of evaluation and transparency or quality control. In this context, the changing role of the church also has to be taken into account. The authority of the church that traditionally may have been sufficient to warrant the legitimacy of its educational procedures in the eyes of most people, no longer is sufficient to convince parents or the general public. The need for empirical research on confirmation work corresponds to such demands.

In sum: there are a number of different reasons why there is a growing need for empirical research on confirmation work. This need arises out of internal

developments in this field itself but it also results from changes in church and society. The empirical approaches used in the field of confirmation work must be open to these different aspects.

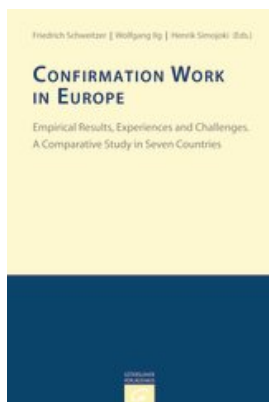
## 1.4 International Comparative Research in Religious Education

The idea of international comparative research in religious education is based on a number of different reasons and experiences. In general, it can be said that international contacts, exchange and collaboration have become an important dimension in this field especially since the 1970s. Since that time, a number of international conferences have played an important role in the religious education discussion and several international associations have been founded – like ISREV (International Seminar on Religious Education and Values), IAPT (International Academy for Practical Theology) and ISERT (International Society for Empirical Research in Theology). The activities of these associations have been an important presupposition for the present project. At the same time, integrated international projects like the present one clearly go beyond the traditional scope of international meetings and conferences. They do not only entail some kind of general exchange or collaboration but an integrated study carried out jointly in several different countries at the same time. As can be seen from parallel studies, for example, in the area of school Religious Education in Europe (Jackson et al. 2007, Ziebertz/Riegel 2009), such approaches are very promising. They offer insights that cannot be reached without international comparative research.

Another reason for international comparative research in religious education has to do with the Christian idea of *ecumene*. This idea implies the need of bringing the different Churches closer together, among others, through better knowledge of each other and through mutual understanding. While this has been understood mostly in terms of doctrinal issues, the practical fields and theological disciplines, including empirical studies, entail important potentials for mutual understanding as well. Moreover, the empirical approach brings us much closer to everyday practises of confirmation work. In this sense, international comparative research in religious education can be seen as an outgrowth of the idea of *ecumene* and as one of its contemporary forms of realisation. In the present context, our joint work has brought together researchers and church representatives from seven European countries and Churches. It has also stimulated international exchange at different levels, for example, with study trips with a focus on confirmation work in another country and Church.

Today, there clearly is a new openness for stimulating ideas not only from

## UNVERKÄUFLICHE LESEPROBE



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Eine wissenschaftliche Analyse der gegenwärtigen Konfirmandenarbeit im europäischen Kontext

Dieser Band enthält die Ergebnisse der ersten international-vergleichenden empirischen Untersuchung von Konfirmandenarbeit in sieben europäischen Ländern und Kirchen (Dänemark, Deutschland, Finnland, Norwegen, Österreich, Schweden, Schweiz), in der mehr als 28.000 Konfirmanden, Eltern und Mitarbeitende befragt wurden. Die Konfirmandenarbeit wird zunächst für jedes Land beschrieben. Vergleichende Analysen geben sodann Einblick in zentrale Fragen von innovativer Bedeutung für die Ausrichtung von Konfirmandenarbeit, angefangen bei didaktischen Fragen bis hin zum Beitrag der Konfirmandenarbeit für die Gesellschaft. Damit bietet der Band zahlreiche Anregungen, die über die jeweiligen nationalen Kontexte hinausreichen. Er wirft neue Fragen auf und enthält Impulse für Praxis und Theorie.

Der Band wurde von einem Autorenteam aus allen beteiligten Ländern gemeinsam erarbeitet und basiert auf einer empirischen Studie mit mehr als 28000 befragten Konfirmanden, Eltern und Mitarbeitenden. Zugleich steht er in einem engen Zusammenhang zu dem Band „Konfirmandenarbeit in Deutschland“.