

## Research Report

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# International Cooperative Research: Experiences and Insights from the Project on Confirmation Work in Europe

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**Abstract:** This article describes the long-term research project on confirmation work in Europe which is carried out in ten countries, and discusses it as an example of international cooperative and comparative research in practical theology. Against the background of an increasing demand for international research in practical theology on the one hand and the far-reaching lack of respective studies which is demonstrated by an analysis of the articles published in IJPT on the other, major results and methodological questions from the project on confirmation work are presented. In a final section, the advantages as well as the challenges of international cooperative and comparative research are discussed.

**Keywords:** international comparative research, confirmation work, empirical youth studies, practical theology and religious education, Europe

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Beitrag führt in die empirischen Studien zur Konfirmandenarbeit in Europa ein und erschließt dieses zehn Länder umfassende Langzeitprojekt als ein Beispiel für international vergleichende und kooperative Forschung im Feld der Praktischen Theologie. Den Ausgangspunkt bildet die auch am IJPT verifizierbare Wahrnehmung, dass international und vergleichend angelegte Beiträge im praktisch-theologischen Diskurs zwar dringend gefragt, aber immer noch eher selten sind. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden das Forschungsdesign und zentrale Ergebnisse der bislang abgeschlossenen Studien präsentiert und

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methodologisch reflektiert. Der abschließende Teil diskutiert auf der Basis der Projekterfahrungen Potenziale und Herausforderungen international vergleichender und kooperativer Forschung.

**Schlagworte:** international vergleichende Forschung, Konfirmandenarbeit, empirische Jugendforschung, Praktische Theologie und Religionspädagogik, Europa

## 1 Introduction

Confirmation work is one of the major pedagogical programs of Protestant churches in Europe. Several hundred thousands of adolescents take part in it every year which makes it one of the most important contact points between youth and the respective churches. This explains why confirmation work has also been of major interest to religious education and practical theology, both in terms of theoretical analysis as well as empirical research.

Since confirmation work is carried out in similar ways in different countries, it makes sense to also make this program the object of international cooperative research. This was (and still is) the intention of the project presented in this article. The project can be considered an example of cooperative and comparative research in practical theology, with new methodological experiences and insights gathered during 15 years of empirical and theoretical research. In the following, the research carried out in this long-term project will be described, with an emphasis on what may be learned from it for research in practical theology in general.

## 2 International-cooperative research in practical theology

It appears obvious today that international cooperative research in the field of practical theology is a timely endeavor. This kind of cooperation corresponds to the growing interest in international encounter and exchange which seem to be the aim of an increasing number of international conferences, as well as to the demand for internationalization in general, for example, set forth by universities or political bodies like the European Commission. Moreover, international cooperation can be considered the best presupposition for international comparative research and also for international knowledge transfer which is currently becom-

ing an interest of its own.<sup>1</sup> However, at least to our knowledge, no attempt has been made so far to review and to critically analyze international cooperative research in practical theology.

Since an overview on international cooperative research in practical theology cannot be presented within this article, we decided to carry out a limited analysis concerning respective publications in the *International Journal of Practical Theology* (IJPT). At least on a *prima facie* basis it makes sense to expect that international cooperative research projects in practical theology should find their way into this journal which can be considered the central periodical dedicated to the international development of this discipline. Moreover, this journal's existence testifies itself to the interest in international cooperation in practical theology.

In order to identify contributions to the IJPT from international cooperative research, the 25 volumes of this journal (1997–2021) were searched for respective articles.<sup>2</sup> The following criteria were applied:

- Does the article have cooperative authorship?
- Is the authorship international? (at least two authors from two different countries)
- Does the article report on work carried out in international cooperation, even if only one author is named or the authors come from only one country? (the present article would count to this category)

In addition to these basic criteria it was also noted if the article pursues an interest in international comparison, assuming that international cooperation is also possible without doing comparative work.

Respective information could be gained from the titles of the articles and the authorships stated. Moreover, the abstracts were checked for respective information. It seemed reasonable to assume that if international cooperation is of importance for the article, it will indeed be mentioned in the abstract. Yet in ambiguous cases it became necessary to consider the whole article.

Even if it has to be admitted that it is sometimes difficult to decide if an article should be considered international comparative or not and that there are many international dimensions and references in the material under study which are not covered by the criteria formulated above, the results of the analysis are still quite interesting and probably surprising as well. The analysis yielded no more than 12 examples of international cooperative research. When the additional cri-

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schweitzer and Peter Schreiner (eds.), *International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education* (Münster & New York: Waxmann, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Raffaella Ehrenfeuchter and Angelika Frescher, who carried out this analysis as student assistants at Tübingen.

teria of comparative research were applied, the number went down to 5 which clearly are both based on international cooperation and have a comparative outlook.<sup>3</sup>

This result may probably be explained by the extraordinary demands connected to international-cooperative research in terms of time budgets and financial resources. Yet this clearly is not the only possible explanation, as plausible as it may be. The results of surveying the IJPT for articles referring to international cooperative research also show that by far not all international-cooperative research projects have found an expression in terms of articles in IJPT. For example, none of the most well-known international projects carried out over the last 20 years in the field of religious education is represented by an article in IJPT, neither TRES (Teaching Religion in a multicultural European Society)<sup>4</sup> nor RedCO (Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries)<sup>5</sup> nor REL-EDU (Religious Education at Schools in Europe).<sup>6</sup> Since the reasons for this absence may be of interest in terms of the development of practical theology, it seems appropriate to consider at least some possible reasons although this must remain somewhat speculative.

The absence of articles covering major international cooperative research projects in the field of religious education in IJPT could be due to certain developments which refer to the disciplinary structures of practical theology and religious education and which have led to a growing distance between both disciplines. At least in many countries, religious education is no longer part of theological faculties or theological institutes but is located, in most cases, in the field of education. Instead of theology it is then religious studies which serve as a basis for religious

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**3** Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, “Religious Education Reform Movements in the United States and in Germany as a Paradigmatic Response to Modernization”, IJPT 1, no. 2 (1997): 227–254; Elaine Graham and James Poling, “Some Expressive Dimensions of a Liberation Practical Theology. Art Forms as Resistance to Evil”, IJPT 4, no. 2 (2000): 163–183; Johannes A. van der Ven and André Beaugard, “After God?”, IJPT 5, no. 1 (2001): 1–30; Claire E. Wolfeich and Jörg Schneider, “A Comparative Research Conversation: American Catholic and German Protestant Spirituality Studies”, IJPT 17, no. 1 (2013): 100–130; Maria Ershova and Jan Hermelink, “Spirituality, Administration, and Normativity in Current Church Organization: An empirical study of the organizational culture in three church denominations, under conditions of social change”, IJPT 16, no. 2 (2013): 221–242.

**4** Hans Georg Ziebertz and Riegel Ulrich (eds.), *How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion: An International Empirical Study in 16 Countries* (Münster: Lit, 2009).

**5** Robert Jackson et al. (eds.), *Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates* (Münster & New York: Waxmann, 2007) and the later volumes published in this series.

**6** Martin Rothgangel, Martin Jäggle, and Thomas Schlag (eds.), *Religious Education at Schools in Europe: Part 1: Central Europe* (Vienna: V&R Unipress, 2015) and the later volumes published in this series.

education. Consequently, religious educators show little interest in practical theology while many practical theologians do not feel that they should be concerned with religious education. This impression applies first of all to religious education at school as opposed to congregational settings but it may also have caused a growing distance between practical theology and religious education in general.

From our own point of view, the international project on confirmation work described below, can be of interest for both, practical theology as well as religious education. It is based on an international cooperative design, it combines empirical approaches with theoretical and especially practical theological and educational interests, and it has led to experiences and insights which could be used as a reference point in other fields. Maybe most importantly, it is one of the few examples of long-term research projects in the field of practical theology. In this respect it shows that such projects make sense in this field and what kinds of research results can actually be expected from them, for example, concerning possibilities for comparison not only internationally but also over time. In fact, longitudinal perspectives which are still rare in this field play a major role for the research described in the following.

### 3 The international project on confirmation work in Europe

The research project on confirmation work was carried out first in seven and then nine European countries. The first two projects went from 2007 to 2018, a third project referring to ten European countries is currently under way.<sup>7</sup> So far, the project has produced 12 volumes published in a special series by the Gütersloher Verlagshaus (3 volumes in English<sup>8</sup>, the others in German<sup>9</sup>). Moreover, there are publications in other languages as well as in a number of different countries.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on this project visit [www.confirmation-research.eu](http://www.confirmation-research.eu).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schweitzer, Wolfgang Ilg, and Henrik Simojoki (eds.), *Confirmation Work in Europe: Empirical Results, Experiences and Challenges: A Comparative Study in Seven Countries* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010); Friedrich Schweitzer et al. (eds.), *Youth, Religion and Confirmation Work in Europe: The Second Study* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015); Friedrich Schweitzer et al. (eds.), *Confirmation Work, Faith, and Volunteerism: A Longitudinal Study on Protestant Adolescents in the Transition towards Adulthood. European Perspectives* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of all studies and their potential for developing confirmation work cf. Henrik Simojoki, Wolfgang Ilg, Thomas Schlag, and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Zukunftsfähige Konfirmanden-*

There also was a parallel project in the United States which, to some degree, was coordinated with the European project, although not as an integral part but as an independent project of its own.<sup>10</sup>

The ten countries or Churches participating in the current European project are Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Most of the churches in these countries are Lutheran, some are Reformed, some combine both traditions. In addition, the Methodist Church in Germany took part in the study.<sup>11</sup> As the list of participating countries indicates, the emphasis was on Central and Northern Europe, i.e. in most cases on those European countries with a long Protestant tradition which follow the practice of preparing young people for confirmation in programs which typically last one to two years. Yet in order to also capture the situation in countries where Protestantism is a minority religion or where other histories were dominant, a number of additional countries were included, i.e. Austria, Estonia, Hungary and Poland.

The study in the European countries was a shared enterprise from the beginning. It was based on a research design developed by an international group of researchers. The project followed the rationale of obtaining a realistic understanding of confirmation work which is based on reliable social scientific methods of inquiry. This makes the study part of practical theology, especially in the sense of an empirical contribution to this field. At the same time, the study was designed such that it would live up to the general standards of social scientific research. This aim seemed important because religion in adolescence has often been neglected in social scientific studies.

### 3.1 Design and samples

The first study collected its data in 2007/2008, the second in 2012/2013 and 2015, the third in 2021/2022. The different years indicate that the studies were based on a longitudinal approach. The confirmands were asked to complete questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of their confirmation time as well as, in the case of the second study, two years after confirmation (the German study added a fourth

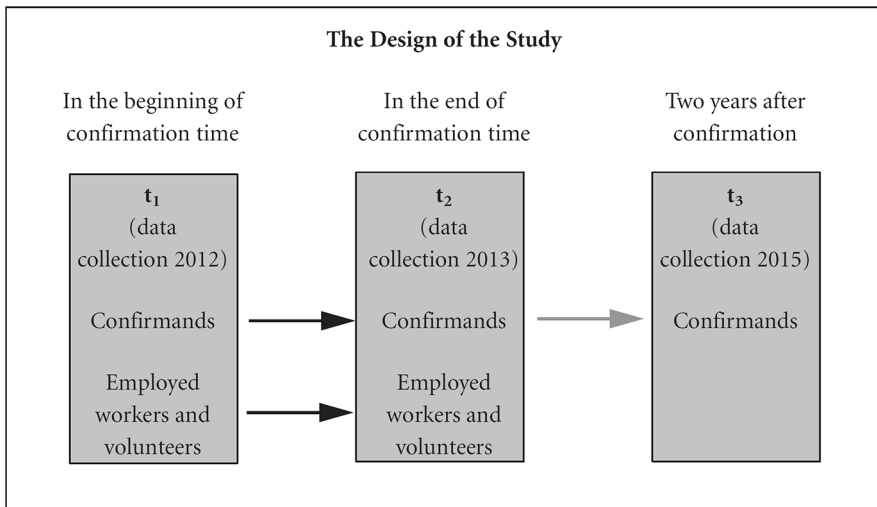
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*arbeit. Empirische Erträge – theologische Orientierungen – Perspektiven für die Praxis* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2019).

**10** Richard R. Osmer and Katherine M. Douglass (eds.), *Cultivating Teen Faith. Insights from the Confirmation Project* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

**11** Tobias Beißwenger and Achim Härtner, *Konfirmandenarbeit im freikirchlichen Kontext. Der Kirchliche Unterricht in der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche in Deutschland. Ergebnisse der bundesweiten Studie 2012–2016* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017).

questionnaire in 2017 and a fifth questionnaire in 2020, i.e. five and eight years after the first questionnaire). The main aim of both studies was, as mentioned above, to obtain a multi-perspective empirical description of confirmation work, with a special emphasis on the expectations and experiences of the confirmands. This required a representative sample. More than 28,000 confirmands took part in the second study. In addition, the workers—ministers as well as volunteers—were included in the study as well. In some countries, there also was a questionnaire for parents. Figure 1 and Table 1 give an overview on the design and the samples of the second study.



**Figure 1:** Design of the second study on confirmation work in Europe

**Table 1:** The total sample and its composition<sup>12</sup>

Country	Total	DE EKD	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	HU	PL	DE EmK*
units/groups	1635	576	28	477	61	111	48	59	134	42	99
confirmands	28070	10191	495	7217	2024	2436	2337	1381	866	362	761
workers	4172	1667	126	905	80	679	105	357	115	–	138

<sup>12</sup> Schweitzer et al., Second Study (n. 8), 25f. In Germany, the Methodist Church (EmK) took part in the study in addition to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Where German “country results” are displayed, they refer to the EKD-dataset.

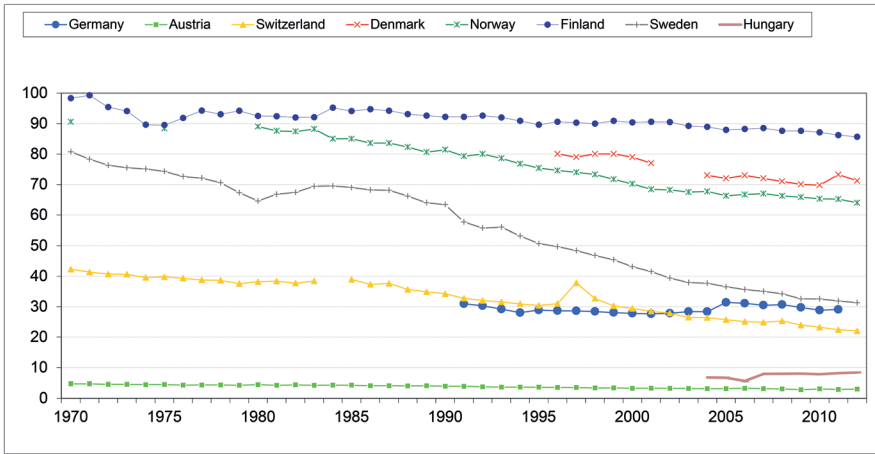
The study referred to both the group level as well as the individual level. By using an individual code, it was possible to follow the individual adolescents over four or, in the case of the German longitudinal study, even eight years. As can be expected, the samples reached in the later waves were much smaller than in the case of the first two – although still considerable (cf., for example, the Ns for the German study:  $t_1(2012)$ : 10.191,  $t_2(2013)$ : 9.096,  $t_3(2015)$ : 2.588,  $t_4(2017)$ : 672,  $t_5(2020)$ : 354).

It proved important that the study also included qualitative approaches. These approaches gave the confirmands themselves a chance to express their experiences and wishes. At the same time, it is much more difficult to use qualitative data in international comparisons than quantitative data. In addition to interviews with confirmands, there also was a qualitative study with young volunteers in confirmation work in Germany.

### **3.2 Participation rates as a first indicator of different developments in comparison**

At the time of the first study, about 500,000 adolescents took part in confirmation work per year in the countries involved with the study (the absolute numbers have declined since then, among others due to smaller percentages of Protestants among young people). Participation rates measured in relationship to the whole population at the age of 13 or 14 years vary from country to country, in line with the general percentage of Protestants in a country. In Finland, for example, which has a Protestant majority, the participation rate was above 80 % while it is as low as 2 % in Austria where the Protestants only make up a very small part of the population. Moreover, participation rates vary over time. In Sweden, for example, the participation rate went down from more than 80 % in 1970 to just above 30 % in 2012, the last year for which data were available at the time of the respective study. But there are also countries like Germany where the participation rate has remained rather stable over time (around 30 %). Figure 2 shows the development of participation rates from the second study (numbers from the third study are not available yet).





**Figure 2:** Participation rates in confirmation work in percent of the whole population of the age group in the respective country<sup>13</sup>

The countries studied have in common that today's social conditions for confirmation work have changed considerably compared to earlier times. In the Scandinavian countries, the ties between church and state used to be particularly close. Basic civil rights such as the right to marry or the right to practise the teaching profession were tied to confirmation. As a result of the successive differentiation and functional disentanglement of state and church, confirmation has largely lost its significance as a rite of passage in the political and social sense, so that the decision to participate has become, at least to a high degree, a matter of individual choice and family agreement.

On the one hand, the participation rates (see Figure 2) show that confirmation work is still a central field of non-formal education. On the other hand, the number of participants is declining in all countries, although not to the same degree. Concerning the striking differences even between countries that are regionally, culturally and religiously close like Finland and Sweden, one might be tempted to attribute these differences to the respective quality of confirmation work. However, the empirical findings clearly speak against this assumption. The most satisfied confirmands are found in Sweden where the participation rate has fallen the most. Obviously, declining participation is embedded in comprehensive processes of social, cultural and religious change (individualisation, pluralisation, de-institutionalisation of religion etc.) which have specific effects in different national and regional contexts.

<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer et al., Second Study (n. 8), 307. The information for Poland was not available.

### 3.3 Selected findings

In the following, selected findings are presented which are particularly interesting from a comparative point of view, i.e. research results which could not have been reached without international comparison. The emphasis is on the perspectives of the confirmands while results concerning the workers will not be reported.<sup>14</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Motivations for taking part

Because non-formal education is voluntary, it is particularly important in this field that educational activities are geared to the needs and expectations of the target group. For this reason, the confirmands were asked about their motives for signing up as well as about their expectations concerning confirmation work. Table 2 shows the 8 highest and 2 lowest rated items:

**Table 2:** Expectations and motives for attending confirmation 2012 in the countries, selected items (%)<sup>15</sup>

I take part in confirmation time, ...	Total	DE	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	HU	PL
because I wanted it myself.	72	70	71	53	83	67	74	82	60	88
to have a beautiful celebration with family and friends on the day of my confirmation.	55	53	43	62	62	49	63	53	43	70
because I was baptised when I was a child.	54	53	61	58	52	52	58	59	60	79
to get money or presents at the end.	51	50	41	59	43	65	49	56	15	28
because it has always been like that in my family.	46	44	50	57	47	44	60	40	57	64
to experience community in the confirmation group.	45	44	52	42	42	30	50	62	43	68

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the results, see Friedrich Schweitzer, Wolfgang Ilg, and Henrik Simojoki, “Summary of the Results – Perspectives for the Future”, in: Schweitzer/Ilg/Simojoki, *Confirmation Work in Europe* (n. 8), 278–294; Henrik Simojoki et al., “Summary of the Results – Perspectives and Challenges for the Future”, in: Schweitzer et al., *Second Study* (n. 8), 294–315; Kati Tervo-Niemelä et al., “Conclusions”, in: Schweitzer et al., “Confirmation, Faith, and Volunteerism” (n. 8), 216–243; Henrik Simojoki and Kati Tervo-Niemelä, *Die Studien zur Konfirmandenarbeit in Europa (2007–2017) als Beispiel für international-vergleichende religionspädagogische Forschung*, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie* 69, no. 3 (2018), 330–341.

<sup>15</sup> Schweitzer et al., *Second Study* (n. 8), 365–367.

Table 2: (continued)

I take part in confirmation time, ...	Total	DE	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	HU	PL
to receive a blessing on the day of confirmation.	44	47	46	32	53	37	35	32	57	85
to come to my own decision about my faith in God.	43	47	50	42	41	31	32	43	50	87
because my family wanted me to do so.	26	21	29	33	20	44	35	28	43	55
because I felt obliged to take part.	15	9	12	14	21	35	29	8	38	77

*N* = 25950-26023; scale: 1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7).

The highest and lowest scoring items show that in all countries a vast majority of confirmands see their decision to register for confirmation as an act of self-determination. Altogether, seven out of ten respondents state that they take part in confirmation time because they wanted it themselves. Agreement with this statement is highest (as very often in the study) in Poland while it was lowest in Switzerland where confirmands are one year older than in the other countries. Items that indicate external pressure or social influence from family or friends show the lowest values. This cross-national pattern of expectations and attitudes fits well into the overall picture of recent research in the sociology of religion which describes a highly pronounced tendency towards religious individualisation in Central and Northern Europe.

Beyond this dominant aspect, the answers do not yield a clear picture. On the contrary, the next most popular motives vary to a high degree in all participating countries. With some variation, the prospect of a big family celebration, the faith-based reference to baptism and the “material blessings” (money and presents) are of similar importance, closely followed by family tradition, group experiences and two central objectives of the Protestant tradition (blessing and religious autonomy). Overall, the statements of the young people do not validate the frequently expressed assumption that young people take part in confirmation primarily for non-religious motives. The different motives should not be considered mutually exclusive. Faith and fun, family tradition and church tradition, community and autonomy, material and spiritual blessings should not be seen in isolation. For the young people themselves it seems to be the combination of these elements which makes confirmation work attractive.

### 3.3.2 Satisfaction and perceived relevance

Good confirmation work depends on how the confirmands experience it. Therefore, the question of whether, to what extent and above all, why young people are satisfied or dissatisfied with their confirmation time is of central importance for the research and development of confirmation work. The results from both studies are encouraging in this regard. Confirmands in all countries express a high level of overall satisfaction with confirmation work. Already in the first study the satisfaction rate was at a remarkable 72 %. Five years later<sup>16</sup> the confirmands' assessment was even more positive: Now more than three quarters of the confirmands expressed satisfaction with the confirmation period as a whole. Such positive responses were found in all participating countries. The values for general satisfaction always reached at least 70 %.

The results of the international longitudinal study published in 2017 show that there is hardly a more important quality criterion for sustainable confirmation work than satisfied confirmands: The more positive the young people experience confirmation work, the more they value the Christian faith and the church and are motivated to volunteer in the church.

The positive overall picture is, however, noticeably clouded in one important respect: 44 % of the confirmands surveyed in 2013 were of the opinion that what they had learned in the confirmation period had little to do with their everyday lives. Here too, the differences between the countries are only small. Satisfaction and life-relevance diverge the most in Switzerland whereas the Polish, Hungarian and also the Swedish confirmands seem to experience confirmation work as more relevant to their everyday lives.

In view of this gap between high overall satisfaction and considerably less relevance, the question arises as to whether influences of designs of confirmation work can be identified that have a positive effect both on satisfaction and subjective relevance. In the findings of the international studies, the particularly positive effects of the camps in this respect come to light. The longer the camp period, the bigger the share of confirmands who are both satisfied with their confirmation time as a whole and affirm the relevance of confirmation work for their everyday lives. In view of this finding, it is important to bear in mind where such camps take place: far away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In a way, they relate to daily routines in the same way that holidays relate to everyday life. And

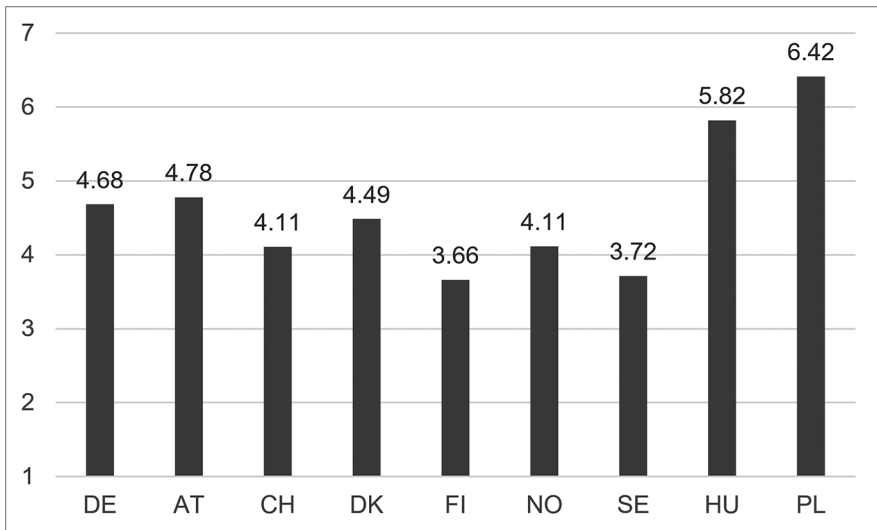
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<sup>16</sup> See Christoph H. Maaß and Henrik Simojoki, "Minding the Gap: Overall Satisfaction and Perceived Daily Life Relevance of Confirmation Work", in: Schweitzer et al., *Second Study* (n. 8), 125–134.

yet – or perhaps precisely because of this – they create an environment in which intense experiences become possible and subjective relevance is experienced in a way that is also felt to be significant for everyday life.

### 3.3.3 Religious attitudes and their development

Both studies had a strong focus on the faith of the confirmands and its development during and after confirmation time. To improve the validity of interpretations, several faith-related indexes were computed, measuring faith-based motives and experiences as well as Christian beliefs and interest in the Christian tradition in the beginning and at the end of confirmation time. Figure 3 shows the mean scores on the index “Christian beliefs  $t_1$ ” that is based on selected items of the  $t_1$ -questionnaire of the second study.



**Figure 3:** Mean scores on “Christian beliefs” index at the beginning of confirmation time (2012)<sup>17</sup>  
N (countries) = 358–10024; scale: 1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable.

<sup>17</sup> Henrik Simojoki, *Researching Confirmation Work in Europe. An Example of Research on Non-Formal Education*, in: *Researching Non-Formal Religious Education in Europe*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer, Wolfgang Ilg and Peter Schreiner (Münster & New York: Waxmann, 2019), 235–247, 242.

The status of Christian beliefs among confirmands obviously depends on the national, cultural and religious contexts. The agreement with Christian beliefs is strongest among the Lutheran confirmands in Poland and the Reformed and Lutheran confirmands in Hungary. In the Nordic countries where the majority of the population is Lutheran, the approval of core Christian beliefs is notably lower, especially in Finland, Sweden and Norway.<sup>18</sup> The values of the German speaking confirmands seem to lie somewhere between these opposite poles. The comparatively lower scores for Switzerland can partly be attributed to age effects. Swiss confirmands are about one year older than those in the other European countries.

An often underestimated factor in explaining such differences is the social significance that the Protestant church has in the respective society. For example, young people who belong to a Protestant minority church – such as in Hungary and especially in Poland – attribute a higher significance to the Christian faith, their church membership and also confirmation work than confirmands who live in a majority church situation. However, as can be seen from the example of Austria, the majority-minority aspect is only one among many of a multi-layered bundle of contextual factors that should not be neglected in researching confirmation work.<sup>19</sup> Concerning such effects, the advantages of international cooperative research compared with national studies are especially clear. Only in international comparison the variations of the sociological macro-background like minority situations can become visible and can be analysed for their effects on the empirical results.

A special focus of the international studies was the question of to what extent the religious attitudes of young people change during the confirmation period. Already in the first study it turned out that there were indeed changes during the confirmation period – both on the level of religious knowledge and with regard to attitudes towards the Christian faith and the church.<sup>20</sup> However, there were considerable differences between the countries: The positive effects of the confirmation period were particularly pronounced in Finland and Sweden. For both contexts, innovative forms of confirmation work are likely to play a role as well as the comparatively low initial values.

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**18** Henrik R. Christensen et al., “What the Adolescents Believe”, in: Schweitzer et al., *Second Study* (n. 8), 32–44.

**19** See Tobias Beißwenger et al., “Is Small Beautiful? Potentials of Confirmation Work in Minority Contexts”, in: Schweitzer et al., “Confirmation, Faith and Volunteerism” (n. 8), 157–169.

**20** Kati Niemelä, “Religious Change during Confirmation Time”, in: Schweitzer/Ilg/Simojoki, *Confirmation Work in Europe* (n. 8), 244–253.

In the second study the focus of the analysis shifted to a question that is in many ways particularly worrisome from the churches' point of view, i.e. if confirmation work gives least to those who need it most.<sup>21</sup> The empirical findings indicate that confirmands indeed benefit from confirmation work in a markedly disproportionate manner. They benefit most if they are female, have an educationally strong background or – the by far most significant factor – were brought up religiously or come from a religious home. Conversely, if they are boys, have a weaker educational background and a low degree of religious socialisation, they are much less likely to benefit from confirmation work.

### 3.3.4 Volunteerism

A main focus of the second study on confirmation work in Europe was on volunteerism. Behind this was the assumption that there is a positive connection between confirmation work and volunteerism. This hypothesis is largely confirmed by the findings.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the confirmation time, only 16 % of the confirmands surveyed said that they could imagine doing voluntary work in the church after confirmation, e.g. in youth work or confirmation work. At the end of the confirmation period, this value was almost twice as high compared to the beginning. Yet there were noticeable differences between the countries. While the increase in Denmark where confirmation classes are very pastoral and mostly take place during school time, is only 4 percentage points (from 7 to 11 %), in Finland it is 27 percentage points (from 18 to 45 %).<sup>23</sup> Obviously there is a connection between the shape of confirmation work and the motivation for volunteerism after confirmation, and this connection is very important for designing confirmation work. Volunteering in the church is more attractive for young people in countries where volunteers are actively involved in confirmation work on a broad basis. Furthermore, among others the following aspects proved to be conducive for volunteerism after confirmation:

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<sup>21</sup> See Bernd Krupka, Wolfgang Ilg and Friedrich Schweitzer, "Giving Least to Those Who Need it Most? How Gender, Social and Religious Backgrounds Influence the Attendance and Experience of Confirmation Time", in: Schweitzer et al., Second Study (n. 8), 117–124.

<sup>22</sup> Jouko Porkka, Henrik Simojoki and Friedrich Schweitzer, "The Wider Context: Volunteerism and Civil Society", in: Schweitzer et al., Second Study (n. 8), 93–103.

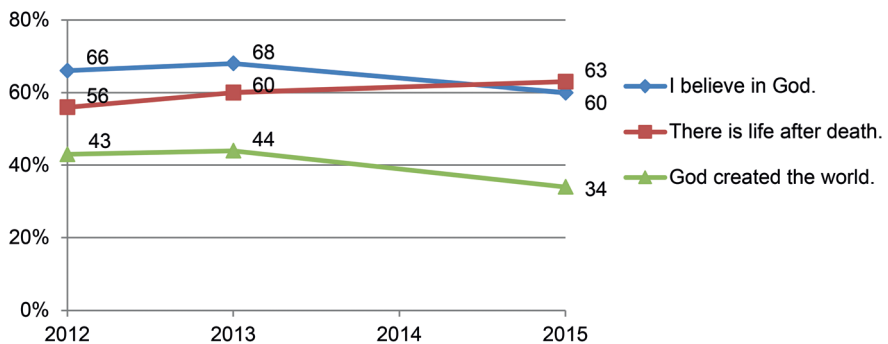
<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 99f.

- the opportunity to volunteer during the confirmation period,
- workers who are themselves motivated to encourage young people to volunteer,
- an actively welcoming “culture of volunteerism” in the congregation.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.3.5 Longitudinal developments and impact of confirmation time

Does confirmation time influence young people’s religious and prosocial attitudes? The longitudinal design of the second study allows for answers to this question.

As some items were repeated in all questionnaires over time, it was possible to follow the answers of the confirmands and to identify changes of their attitudes. Figure 4 displays the development of three selected items over time.



**Figure 4:** Development in agreement to belief questions:  $t_1$  (2012),  $t_2$  (2013),  $t_3$  (2015)<sup>25</sup>  
*N=3148, international sample. The vertical axis shows the share of those with a positive response.*

The items show two characteristic patterns in the development of young people’s attitudes concerning their faith. The item “life after death” is one of the few faith-related items with a steady increase over time. While only 56% of the confirmands believe in life after death when they start their confirmation period, this

<sup>24</sup> See Jouko Porkka/Friedrich Schweitzer/Henrik Simojoki, “How Confirmands Become Volunteers”, in: Schweitzer et al., *Confirmation, Faith and Volunteerism*, 84–113.

<sup>25</sup> Henrik Christensen, Dagmar Lager, Friedrich Schweitzer, “Religious Trajectories in Adolescence: Beliefs and Attitudes”, in: Schweitzer et al., *Confirmation, Faith, and Volunteerism* (n. 8), 45–60, 49.



share rises to 60 % at the end of confirmation time. Two years after confirmation it is even higher (63 %).

The two other items show a pattern which can be found in many of the other attitudes expressing approval of Christian dogmatic topics as well. The initial value slightly increases during confirmation time and decreases after that. Although the share of those believing in God starts significantly higher than the belief in God creating the world, both undergo a clear decline between the age of 14 (the typical age of confirmation) and 16. The additional surveys carried out in Germany with 18 and 21 year olds show that this decline continues into young adulthood.<sup>26</sup> Given the continuous decline of agreement from the age of 14 to the age of 21 it is plausible to assume that such a decline would also occur between the ages of 13 and 14 if there was no confirmation time with its positive influence concerning the Christian faith. Yet it must also be admitted that this assumption cannot be proven on the basis of this survey which does not allow for comparisons with young people who do not participate in confirmation work.

A certain alternative to such comparisons can be multi-level analysis for scrutinizing possible predictors of individual developments based on the longitudinal data. One important aim in the studies was to identify the presuppositions for adolescents to become volunteers after confirmation. When asked at the age of 16 years, 17 % of the respondents reported that they are currently engaged in voluntary work and another 9 % reported that they had done so after confirmation but are no longer active in this respect (most often due to a lack of time). With the large datasets it was possible to conduct a multi-level analysis in order to identify predictors for the transition into volunteerism. One surprising result of this analysis was that the number of contacts with other volunteers was highly significant not only on the individual level but also on the social level (parishes) and the macro level (national churches). Detailed explanations concerning the analysis and its possible meanings are discussed in the publications of the research project.<sup>27</sup>

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**26** Wolfgang Ilg, Michael Pohlers, Aitana Gräbs-Santiago and Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Jung – evangelisch – engagiert: Langzeiteffekte der Konfirmandenarbeit und Übergänge in ehrenamtliches Engagement. Empirische Studien im biografischen Horizont* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2018). Newest data from the 21 year old respondentens are published in: Henrik Simojoki and Wolfgang Ilg, “Automatische Distanzierung? Transformationen im Kirchenverhältnis konfirmierter Jugendlicher im Übergang zum Erwachsenenalter. Ergebnisse der PostKonf-Längsschnittstudie”, *Pastoraltheologie* 111, no. 4(2022): 146–169.

**27** Wolfgang Ilg, Kati Tervo-Niemelä and Christoph Maaß, “Believing, Belonging and Volunteerism in Adolescence: Predictive Factors from Childhood and Confirmation Time in a Multi-Level Framework”, in: Schweitzer at al., *Confirmation, Faith, and Volunteerism* (n. 8), 114–127.

## 4 Benefits and challenges of international cooperative research

### 4.1 Benefits of international comparative research

The relevance of international comparative research is generally accepted today so that it is not necessary to repeat respective reasons here. Instead the focus will be on experiences and insights related to the project on confirmation work itself.

First of all, international-comparative research broadens the view on confirmation work. Traditionally, the perspective on this program for youth in the Protestant churches was limited to the respective situation in an individual country, among others, in line with the historically close relationship between the Protestant churches and the state in many European majority contexts. Given the increasing influence of globalisation and Europeanisation, it is important to make use of international comparative perspectives in research in practical theology as well.

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 mostly been understood in terms of doctrinal issues, the practical fields and theological disciplines, including empirical studies, entail important potentials for mutual understanding as well.

Moreover, the studies on confirmation work have contributed to international knowledge transfer in practical theology and religious education. In this respect they could build upon earlier exchanges and transfers in this field. A prominent example of this transfer are confirmation camps. Originating in Finnish and Swedish confirmation work, such camps have become an essential part of confirmation work in many other countries. However, such processes of knowledge transfer should also be accompanied by historical-hermeneutical and empirical research. For example, the studies on confirmation work prove that camps have a positive impact on the effects of confirmation work.

In many respects, comparative research helps to identify overarching specific challenges. To cite just one example, it makes a big difference whether and to what extent the negative image of church services among today's confirmands is due to liturgical forms which are not in line with the needs of young people, or if it is due to lacking religious socialisation as a prerequisite for appreciating church services. Such questions can be answered more precisely by international comparative research.

While international-comparative research broadens the horizon, it also sharpens the understanding of both the contextual nature of the developments in one's own context as well as in other contexts. Additionally, it highlights the importance of country-specific traditions and practices. In Austria and Germany where Religious Education at school is taught in a denominational setting, confirmation work operates in a context that is very different from, for example, Sweden where Religious Education at school has been clearly separate from the church for the last 50 years. Country-specific practices can also be of general interest. For example, in Denmark, the celebration of the confirmation day has particularly positive connotations among the confirmands. At the end of confirmation time, 91 % of respondents said that it was important to them to have a beautiful celebration with families and friends – almost 30 percent points more than at the beginning of confirmation time. That this finding is not trivial is shown by the  $t_3$ -survey two years after confirmation. In retrospect, more than two thirds of the Danish confirmands view their day of confirmation as one of the most important days in their lives – significantly more than in all other countries. One can thus learn from Danish confirmation work that the festive aspect of the confirmation day is an important element of sustainable confirmation work and consequently could be emphasised more in other countries as well.

Finally, international comparative research can provide impulses for conceptual innovations and improved practice. After the first study had already indicated a positive connection between confirmation work and youth volunteerism, the second study had a strong focus on confirmation work, faith and volunteerism. Due to the mainly encouraging findings, the involvement of youth volunteers in different European contexts continued to gain momentum.

## 4.2 Methodological challenges of international comparative research

An obvious challenge for international comparative research is language. It begins with the key terminology of the field or program under study which varies in the different national contexts. For example, the term “tradition” has more positive connotations in some countries than in others. Thus, hermeneutical clarifications are an ongoing task of comparative research. Another typical problem are shifts in meaning when translating items into different languages.

While at least most of the linguistic problems could be solved through extensive checks, there remains a fundamental question that refers to confirmation work in different countries as common object of research. The main implication of the differences between the situation of confirmation work in different coun-

tries is that in spite of the many similarities between the countries in this respect referred to in this article, there is no identical structure that could be studied. Instead, there are particular realities of teaching, learning and experiencing that cannot be compared to each other without careful consideration of the feasibility of the comparison intended. Therefore, all comparative statements must be treated with utmost care and with a constant eye on their limitations.

To some degree, problems of international validity and reliability can be solved by empirical testing. Yet even with all statistical precautions, comparative research cannot escape the contextuality of all data and, even more, the contextual nature of all interpretations. This is why in the publications with the results from the two studies on confirmation work the data is presented both in contextually structured country reports and in thematically structured comparative analyses. Obviously, international comparisons cannot replace national reports. Instead, there must be a continuous interplay between regional and national accounts and international comparisons – with special attention being given to the balance between contextual and more decontextualised approaches that should complement each other.

In all studies the challenge of multi-contextuality is further increased by multi-perspectivity, since both the perspectives of the adolescents and of the workers were included. In the second study, the comparative design implied even more complexity because two additional levels of comparison were introduced. With the aim of exploring long-term developments in confirmation work, the new results were compared to those of the first study conducted five years earlier. Additionally, the study was designed as a longitudinal study, with responses at the beginning and the end of confirmation time as well as two years after confirmation. The last waves of questionnaires posed a specific methodological challenge concerning the samples. Whereas the earlier survey aimed for representative data, the longitudinal study with its samples becoming smaller with every step, had its focus on individual paths of development or change at a group level.

### **4.3 Practical challenges – and how to overcome them**

In addition to the theoretical considerations concerning international cooperative and comparative research, the experiences with researching confirmation work accumulated over 15 years also allow for the identification of practical challenges which may be of interest beyond the research project itself. In order to encourage other researchers to undertake similar projects we also add some practical ideas of how such challenges can be overcome.

One of the major challenges for international cooperation is the question how a project of this size can actually be started. The answer refers to tensions and sounds almost paradoxical. International cooperation can never begin as an initiative from one country alone – but it often needs the strong initiative of one or few researchers who share a common vision and have enough enthusiasm to inspire others.

The European studies on confirmation work started in a “bottom up” rather than in a “top down” manner. During a conference in 2007, some researchers from different countries became aware of similar ideas harboured in their respective countries concerning empirical research on confirmation work. Consequently, a joint effort appeared to be promising. The idea of a joint effort quickly grew and gained momentum when it was spread into the existing informal networks. The emergence of the new research project would have been impossible if there had not been a solid basis of international relationships from the time before the project. Such personal relationships need time to grow and they are nourished by personal encounters. Every international conference holds the potential of becoming the birthplace of new forms of cooperation – and it is these unforeseen effects (often during coffee breaks!) that are a major advantage of real-life conferences over digital meetings. No matter if it is a local or an international project, personal trust is the currency which makes cooperation reliable, effective and pleasing.

As soon as an international project is in its preparation phase the question of finances comes into play. The experiences of the confirmation research project show that it seems to be increasingly difficult to find funding for church related research from secular institutions or from a state-related entity like the European Union. Programs in Christian education, even if they boast the impressive size of half a million adolescents every year, appear to be an internal matter for the churches which potential sponsors from outside the church do not want to support. Consequently, the financial resources for the confirmation project had to be raised from the churches in the participating countries. If the project had only aimed for international comparisons, the churches would probably have been less willing to contribute financially than they actually were in this case. In this respect it was of decisive importance that the design of the survey promised results not only on an international level but also for each country involved. For Germany, the research team even promised to provide results for all of the 20 regional churches in Germany (as well as for the Methodist Church) which implied that a sample size of more than 10.000 confirmands was needed in Germany alone. In the end, all of the Protestant churches in the participating countries agreed to be the sponsors of the project. Another motive for them was that international cooperation would also mean mutual support and saving money. Many tasks could be fulfilled by a central team, for example formatting the questionnaires or the computing of quan-

titative data. The travel expenses in international projects are certainly higher than in national projects but a good combination of digital and personal meetings can keep costs at bay.

Once these practical hurdles have been overcome, it is necessary to get to know the specific situation in the partner countries (which might include visits there and speaks for changing locations of the team meetings). Only by becoming thoroughly acquainted with the country-specific situations is it possible to identify common concepts – or to realise that similar terms may have very different connotations in different countries. But not only such conceptual differences must be considered most carefully. Also, sociological differences and sensitive topics must be taken into account.

For international research, confirmation work has the advantage of being a program which is largely comparable in all of the participating countries. Although there are certain differences (for example, in some countries the confirmands are 14 years old at the time of confirmation, in other countries they are one year older), the same basic scheme applies to all confirmation groups involved: A group often of the size of roughly a school class has regular meetings for a set period of time, concluded by a festive celebration, the confirmation day. This similar setting helped very much in designing a common methodology. For example, it could be ensured in all participating countries that the questionnaires were filled in during group meetings and that the target group could be defined precisely (which would be less clear in fields like open youth work). As already mentioned, the qualitative parts of the confirmation studies posed more difficulties for international comparisons than the quantitative results that could be put together in tables and figures.

In conclusion international cooperation poses many challenges – but at the same time produces fruitful opportunities for mutual learning and support. If there is a good team spirit instead of competitive attitudes among the researchers involved, international teams have the chance not only to achieve research results of an impressive geographical scope but can also develop competences beyond the horizon of research projects among a homogeneous setting of colleagues and surroundings in their home countries.

#### **4.4 Next steps: the third study and the i-conf project**

At the time of writing this article, the third international study on confirmation work is in the process of being conducted. As mentioned above, the spectrum of participating country contexts has been expanded to ten (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland).

The representative study replicates the basic design of the first two studies with surveys at the beginning and end of the confirmation period 2021/2022. Through this it becomes possible to capture long-term developments in confirmation work over a period of 14 years. The study has its focus on two challenges which have gained urgency since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, digital learning and online communication are highlighted, on the other hand the pedagogical dimension of confirmation work is examined in depth.

The study is furthermore related to the international i-conf project which aims at developing confirmation work by using digital feedback. For this purpose, a digital multifunctional feedback tool was created that can be used free of charge. The online tool contributes to the pedagogical quality development of confirmation work on several levels. Confirmands can easily give feedback concerning their experiences during confirmation work via their mobile phones. Full-time employees and volunteers can gain an impression of the confirmands' feedback without time-consuming manual evaluation of feedback forms. On the basis of the feedback they can draw conclusions for further improvements of confirmation work in their parish. Finally, as is the case in the third study, the online tool can be utilized for empirical research.

I-conf can be found online on [www.i-konf.eu](http://www.i-konf.eu) and is available in more than ten languages. The provision of this tool for interactive feedback in confirmation work is another fruit of the international cooperation described in this article. The European project shows that empirical research on confirmation work can contribute to further developing and improving this programme of Protestant churches both at the local level and in an international horizon.

## 5 Conclusion

Confirmation work is only one field of practical theology which speaks against the attempt to generalize insights from researching this field to other fields of practical theology. Many of the procedures described in this article are clearly related to the specific presuppositions in this field. Yet it seems nevertheless obvious that international cooperative research has proven to be a very promising approach which could indeed be used in other fields of practical theology as well. Especially quantitative methodologies allow for international comparisons, even if such comparisons should also include qualitative approaches in order to increase ecological validity.

In the case of the studies on confirmation work, the shared European context was of help for the international cooperation but it is easy to see that such cooperation must not be limited to neighbouring countries. Other countries could also

be included, and so could other religions. It would be interesting to investigate, for example, the similarities and differences of rites de passages in the transition from childhood to adolescence in other religions or what it means for young people if no such rites exist, for example in Islam.

Doing research together at an international level offers many opportunities for international knowledge transfer and for sharing new insights. For all those who have been part of the international team responsible for the studies on confirmation work it has been an exciting experience to cooperate within such a team, especially over the long period of time involved in this case. International cooperation in practical theology is certainly well worth the extra efforts it brings with it. In any case, the rewards of this cooperation clearly outweigh all challenges that have to be mastered for the sake of successful collaboration.