

Christian Initiation as a Comprehensive Process: Confirmation in the Contemporary German Context

Friedrich Schweitzer

The main intention of this paper is to introduce readers to the current praxis of confirming adolescents in Germany, to the classes that come before confirmation, and to the wider background of the whole process of Christian initiation. Special emphasis is given to the place of confirmation in Christian education in (western) Germany and to the changing place of confirmation in the human life cycle. New ways of doing confirmation and confirmation work in Germany since the 1960s are described and discussed. Moreover, the paper identifies changing views of children and adolescents in church and theology (child theology, theology of childhood, children's theology, among others) as a main background for such new approaches. In conclusion, the paper addresses two questions for the future – the need for empirical evaluation including the perspective of children and adolescents on the one hand and the need for preparing young people for an increasingly pluralist world on the other.

The main intention of my paper is to introduce readers to the current praxis of confirming adolescents in Germany, to the classes that come before confirmation, and to the wider background of the whole process of Christian initiation. In my own work as a religious educator and practical theologian, the human life cycle has always played an important role. I am convinced that the ways in which confirmation fits – or does not fit – with the individual life cycle today, raise important questions for the current praxis of confirmation. I will therefore also address the changing place of confirmation within the human life cycle.

However, I did not write this article from the perspective of a historian or sociologist but from the perspective of practical theology. This implies that the descriptive task has to be taken seriously but that we will also have to look at some of the normative ideas and theological concepts that are guiding contemporary educational work with children and youth in the church. Finally I will address some open questions that I consider important for the future.

Before doing this, a word about terminology might be helpful. I am aware that many people in the UK sharply distinguish between religious education and religious nurture. For me, this distinction raises a lot of difficulties, not only because we do not have this distinction in the German language (and

also not because this distinction is less clear in American English than in British English) but because I am simply not convinced that a clear-cut division between education and nurture is possible or desirable. I am convinced that all pedagogy in our congregations should be educational and that all religious education, for example, in the state school cannot just be religiously neutral or secular (as some of my British colleagues like to call it). In my understanding, nurture and education are closely interconnected. So I will refer to religious or Christian education in a number of places where some readers might prefer to speak or think of nurture.

1. The Place of Confirmation in Christian Education in Germany

In the German tradition, confirmation was rarely understood as a liturgical event that can stand by itself. Martin Luther himself was actually less interested in celebrating confirmation than in making sure that all members of the congregation, young or old, educated or not, would have ample opportunity to take part in catechetical instruction. Consequently, many reformers introduced new types of catechetical instruction, for example, catechetical sermons and catechism exercises in the homes of all members of the congregation. In any case, the confirmation classes before confirmation received a lot of attention, in many cases more than the act of confirmation itself. Prime examples in the history of German Protestantism were the Pietist theologians and educators P.J. Spener and A.H. Francke who inaugurated new and more effective techniques for instructing children and adolescents. It was their hope and intention that children and adolescents would really come to understand what they are taught rather than turning into so-called parrots repeating mindlessly whatever they had heard or learned by heart. Across different theological camps and tendencies, the catechetical or educational effort connected to confirmation has been typical of the German tradition. This explains, among others, why the catechism has remained part of our living heritage, especially in my own Landeskirche in Württemberg where the confirmands still have to memorize parts of the Lutheran catechism.

Yet especially since the 19th century, church leaders and theologians increasingly realized that confirmation classes would not be sufficient in order to effectively initiate the younger generation to the Christian faith. Before that time, the ministers had felt that they could rely on the religion teachers in school to prepare the way for their confirmation classes that could then be built upon several years of sound religious instruction. Moreover, even before the children started school, the parents would have done their job by laying the groundwork for all future Christian initiation. Be it that things had

really changed over the centuries – which most likely was true in the case of the schools that had become more independent from the church by the time of the 19th century – or be it that expectations had risen – which most likely was also the case because of the changing educational awareness of the time – in any case, the ministers now saw themselves increasingly isolated with the task of preparing young people for confirmation. The concern how Christian initiation can become more effective and how the whole process of confirmation should be reconstructed and possibly be broadened has remained a serious concern ever since.

Today, confirmation classes last between something like nine months and two years, depending on the particular church (Landeskirche). It is quite obvious that these classes cannot reach the aim of Christian initiation by themselves. Consequently we have to become clear about what a minister may presuppose in terms of prior exposure to the Christian faith in childhood and adolescence. In the following, I will limit myself mostly to former West Germany, assuming that others will highlight the situation in the East which is quite different from the situation in the West.

Families

The majority of the children in Germany are baptized as infants. If both parents belong to the church (in West Germany this is the case with 80% of the population, in East Germany only with 20 – 25%), there is a close to 100% chance that their children will be baptized at an early age or at least before the age of 14, the typical age of confirmation in Germany. Survey studies among church members indicate that the positive attitude towards infant baptism has been on the rise even during the last few decades. Many more people agree with the praxis of infant baptism today than was the case 20 or 30 years ago. Many parents also indicate that they find it important that their children receive some kind of Christian education. Consequently, one might assume that children in Germany are growing up in a solidly Christian environment.

Yet this is clearly not the case. While families in Germany have certainly not become just secular, most of them show a very limited interest in the activities of the church. Few children make it to Sunday school and very few Protestant parents find it important that their children develop some attachment to the church or get used to regular church attendance. On an average Sunday, only something like 3 or 4% of the members attend a service and many of them belong to the 50 plus generation. Interview studies with parents have shown that parents and families are more interested in a type of religion or faith that fits with their own needs as a family than with the life of congregations. Researchers speak of ‘family religion’ (Familienreligi-

osiät) in order to describe this kind of religious attitude. It is most of all the times of crisis triggered, for example, by a death in the family or by the more happy event of a birth that are of religious importance within the family. One can also call this a type of religion that is bound to the life cycle, not only to the life cycle of the individual but of the family as a whole.

Yet the religious influence of the family has remained strong. In one of our own recent studies on the effects of religious education in the family, we found that families still play an important role for the religious biographies of their children but that their influence can be positive as well as negative. Consequently, the question remains how congregations can be more effective in involving parents and in supporting them in terms of religious education.

Nursery Schools and Kindergartens

After the age of three, most German children attend some kind of pre-school educational facility, at least for three or four hours per day. The majority of these facilities in western Germany are run by either the Protestant or Catholic church. According to the principle of subsidiarity, the German state takes over a high percentage of the cost for the institution but leaves it to the churches and to other associations to organize them. Theoretically, this is a great chance for the churches to include at least some elements of Christian initiation with this work. In reality, however, due to a more and more multicultural and multireligious population even in Protestant nurseries, many kindergarten teachers have become quite insecure of how to do any kind of religious education with such a mixed group of parents and children. They feel that it cannot be the task of education to turn Muslim children into Christians, and they feel challenged by parents without religious affiliation. How, for example, can they still do the traditional Thanksgiving services with the children coming to church with their little baskets – a once very well-known tradition in Germany – if a good part of the children do not even belong to the church? In addition to this, most kindergarten teachers are convinced of modern child-centered approaches that, at least according to their understanding, speak against any type of instruction, be it Christian instruction or some other kind. Consequently, the Christian education profile of many nurseries and kindergartens is not very high, even if they are maintained by the church.

Again, this is not a situation that should be deplored in the first place. Kindergarten work still holds a lot of potential for Christian education. Yet it will take major efforts, for example, of ongoing training with kindergarten teachers, of program development and of finding new ways for working with mixed groups of children without having to skip the religious dimension

which, in fact, is still very important for the children themselves. For the time being, however, one cannot rely on kindergartens as a regular and dependable agency of Christian initiation.

Religious Education in the School

In Germany, religious education has a comparatively strong position in the state school (appr. 95% of the German students attend state schools). This position is due to the German constitution (article 7.3) that establishes religious education as an 'ordinary subject' taught 'in accordance with the principles of the religious communities'. The influence of the state is limited to organizing and controlling RE while the religious communities, including the churches, have the major say for the curriculum. Until today, RE in Germany is denominational, at least in its legal basis. Actually it is called 'confessional' but again we must be aware of the different meanings of 'confessional RE' in Germany and in the UK where 'confessional' is often identified with indoctrination. In Germany, denominational RE is clearly not indoctrinary but is considered a legitimate part of education, at least by many educators. The dual character of German RE as confessional and educational also shows up in teacher training. In addition to the regular teaching licence awarded by the state upon the completion of several years of theological training at a university or teachers college, religion teachers must also be certified by a church or, in the case of non Christian RE (which is becoming more frequent), by the respective religious community. Quite often, RE teachers are committed Christians themselves but this does not mean that their aim would be to turn their students into equally committed Christians through their teaching. Recent survey studies conducted with German religion teachers indicate that the majority aims at introducing young people to the Christian tradition in order to give them a basis for their own independent decisions in religious matters.

While RE in Germany is still connected to church and theology, it has become much more educational over the last few decades. Its rationale is stated on educational grounds, not only by the teachers and the schools but also by the church. The EKD, for example, makes this quite clear in its last major statement on RE published in 1994 by pointing out that, from the perspective of the church, RE is not a 'privilege' of the church but is based on the needs of the children and of their education.

I do not want to go into the complex debates about RE in Germany that have possibly been as heated as in the UK. What is important for our present context is the realization that RE in German schools can no longer be expected to pave the way for confirmation in the traditional sense. RE does introduce children and adolescents to some of the most important stories and

narratives of the Bible and it will also create some awareness of Christian ethics. Yet school religious education does very little in terms of exposing students to liturgy or to the life of a congregation. Given the public agendas of value education and of education for peace and tolerance between the followers of different religions in Germany and in the European Union, it is not to be expected that this situation will change and that RE will move closer to the church in the future. RE is an important part of Christian initiation in Germany in a broad sense but the specific educational aims of RE also imply specific limitations in terms of introducing young people to the church.

Christian Youth Work

Christian youth groups of different types – YMCA groups, Christian Scouts, and groups organized by the congregations themselves – play an important role in many places. Often starting at the age of 7, such groups involve children and adolescents as participants and also as junior youth leaders for weekly groups, summer camps, and other activities. Such youth groups can be considered a strong and effective kind of Christian initiation, even if the scope of their activities is more youth centered than congregational. Many of their activities take place within a context that is clearly separate from other activities of the congregation and of regular worship.

Another limitation of Christian youth work lies in its quantitative scope. According to different surveys, about 10 to 12% of all children and adolescents in Germany come in touch with respective youth programs, and this includes not only regular participation and formal membership but also one-time participation, for example, in some type of vacation organized by Christian youth work. Consequently, Christian youth work can mean a lot for those who participate but the number of those who really do is clearly limited.

Consequences for Confirmation

It is easy to see that the current situation of Christian education before the age of confirmation has far-reaching implications for the ways in which young people must be prepared for confirmation. In many cases, the time of the confirmation classes is the first time in their lives to come into contact with regular worship services and to learn about the life of the congregation. Some ministers keep being shocked by the lack of pertinent knowledge and by the lack of liturgical sensitivity of some of the adolescents joining the class. (I myself vividly remember how some of the boys in the first confirmation class led by myself took it for granted that you could sit on the altar as if it was the bench in front of their high school building – respect and

reverent behavior had certainly not been taught in their homes!) At the same time, German church statistics indicate an enormous stability of confirmation as an institution of Christian initiation. Compared to the number of baptisms 14 years earlier, these statistics suggest a rate of 100% for participation in confirmation! This does not mean that there are no exceptions in any given congregation. Yet the over-all picture shows surprising continuity and stability.

Yet given the situation of Christian education described so far, it is almost self-evident that the praxis of confirmation can only be effective if it makes a realistic evaluation its starting point. The result of this evaluation clearly is that we have to be prepared for working with adolescents who are not familiar with the church or with the meaning and life of a congregation. Compared to earlier times in history, this situation does not only entail disadvantages. While ministers may find it harder to do their work without being able to rely on the respect and authority afforded by a surrounding culture – by parents, teachers, and other members of the community – it also becomes easier to intentionally initiate young people to new experiences. Since they do not come to the congregation feeling that they know everything about the life of the congregation, the encounter with the congregation can become quite interesting and stimulating for them. Yet such advantages will not make themselves available automatically. This is why the reform attempts of the last three decades have been so important.

Before introducing you to some of the most important aspects of these reforms, I want to take up a second line of analysis concerning the relationship between confirmation and the life cycle.

2. The Changing Place of Confirmation in the Human Life Cycle

When confirmation was introduced as a general rite to be passed by all members of the church in Germany some time in 18th century, the age of 14 or 15 years was chosen as the normal time for confirmation. More important than the exact age was the implication that it should take place at the point of transition between school age and adult work life. In the beginning, while many children were still part of the work force and did not attend school on a regular basis, this transition was not very marked. The more and the longer children went to school, however, confirmation took on the character of a *rite de passage* that added to its original meaning. Confirmation now became a marker event at the threshold of early adulthood. Some researchers of the history of adolescence even claim that the general introduction of confirmation was one of the important social and institutional influences that brought about modern adolescence as a new stage in life.

During the 20th century and especially after the major educational reforms of the 1960s, another important change took place. While in 1960, about 80 – 90% of German youth at the age of 15 had left school for good, since the 1970s and 1980s it takes them until approximately age 18 to reach that point. In other words, most adolescents in Germany attend some kind of school or school-type training until the age of 18.

The age of confirmation, however, was not changed. It stayed at the average age of 14. Yet while the chronology of confirmation stayed the same, its meaning and position within the life cycle changed. No longer does confirmation mark a turning point in one's life. There is no new independence after confirmation. The students stay in school for many years after confirmation, just like they attended school for many years before confirmation. The association of confirmation with becoming adult is no longer possible.

Some analysts introduced the idea that confirmation should celebrate the end of childhood in order to provide it with a new and different basis within the life cycle. According to them, this would make sense to a lot of young people and also to their parents because leaving behind one's childhood and, in terms of the parents, seeing one's children as more independent, is always an ambivalent process. From my point of view, there may be some value to this idea. Yet on the whole, celebrating the end of childhood at the age of 14 no longer agrees with the reality of today's adolescents. Research on adolescence in Germany indicates that childhood has become shorter and shorter. It barely lasts longer than for the first decade of life. Moreover, the changes are not limited to a certain early teenage mindset and behavior – they are firmly rooted in the physiology of an earlier onset of puberty. International comparative studies on puberty carried out even several decades ago clearly show that puberty started several years earlier in the second half of the 20th century than it used to in the 19th or early 20th century.

The conclusion concerning the time of confirmation in Germany can only be that confirmation now takes place in the midst of adolescence. The young people enter confirmation classes as adolescents, and they will stay adolescents for many more years after confirmation. Some researchers tend to think that adolescence now lasts until the age of twenty of twenty five while some German youth studies even include the 30 year olds because adulthood seems to start later and later. Consequently, the question is inevitable how the praxis of confirmation can be transformed in order to keep pace with the transformations of the life cycle. In any case, rather than being a marker event at the threshold of adulthood, confirmation at age 14 has come to be part of adolescence and requires educational approaches that are in line with this.

3. New Ways of Doing Confirmation in Germany Since the 1960s

To be sure, the two aspects that I have briefly shed some light on – the place of confirmation in Christian education in Germany and the changing place of confirmation in the human life cycle – were not the only driving forces behind the many attempts of finding new ways of doing confirmation in Germany since the 1960s. Other changes concerned the position of the church within German society, new theological perspectives, and also a number of initiatives within the church itself. I will, however, not attempt to give you a comprehensive picture of all that has happened during the last three or four decades, even if confirmation has clearly been affected by most of it in one way or the other. In addition, I will again limit myself to western Germany because, for obvious reasons, the history of eastern Germany especially during the time of the GDR was very different.

What then are the most important changes concerning confirmation? In some ways one could say that the title of my presentation – ‘initiation and confirmation as a whole process’ – points out exactly the main direction of the corresponding renewal. One of the clearest indicators is a new terminology. In German, it has become customary to blend two formerly separate concepts – the concept of catechesis or instruction for confirmation on the one hand and the concept of youth work on the other. The result is a new term: *confirmation work – working with confirmands*, working with them as young people just like in youth work.

The new terminology (which, admittedly, sounds much better in German than in English) goes along with the inclusion of number of elements from youth work, from modern didactics and education. I can only mention a few here:

- new time structures
- different contents beyond the catechism
- creative and active methods
- additional personnel beyond clergy
- introduction of confirmation camps and retreats
- internships within the congregation
- process-oriented introduction to the eucharist
- services with active participation of the confirmands
- new liturgies for the celebration of confirmation.

Is there a common denominator to these different aspects? In my understanding, the common core is, or should at least be, a new understanding of confirmation as a process – the process of accompanying younger persons for some time on their way through adolescence and towards an adulthood that is still pretty far away for most of them. ‘Confirmation work’ means just this: Being prepared to be a partner on the way – a partner who is sensitive and open for adolescents, an adult who takes time for them in the name of the church. Or, to put it the other way round: ‘Confirmation work’ does not mean to turn secular adolescents into confessing Christians. It does not mean to instil into them the integrity of the catechism or of Christian doctrine. It means giving them a chance for being who they are while still gaining some serious insights into Christian faith and belief.

Unfortunately, there have not been many empirical studies on how the participants really experience these new ways of doing confirmation. Yet some data are available, and so are many personal reports from pastors and parents. According to all we know from such sources we can say that the new ways have been very successful. The very high rates of participation in confirmation mentioned earlier are not only due to social tradition and to deeply ingrained habits. They are also due to positive experiences with how confirmation is done today.

One of the most successful new elements is the extended retreat for confirmands. In many cases, this retreat lasts for three or four days. It takes place somewhere in the area, for example, in a self-catering house that is suitable for young people. The program entails study units but also liturgical and meditation events as well as playing games and just having fun together. The staff responsible for the retreat consists of the minister plus youth workers who can be older adolescents, young adult volunteers, or professionals. In any case, the involvement of additional personnel can create important links to other parts of the congregation beyond the immediate parameters of confirmation.

The cooperation between ‘confirmation work’ and youth work also is important for additional reasons. One of the problems with confirmation in Germany is the fact that it often turns out not to be the starting point for closer contact with the congregation but rather turns out as the end of such contact. Just like in many other western countries, the time of late adolescence and young adulthood – what some have come to call postadolescence – is the period in life when most people are very distant from the church. It also is the period with the highest drop-out rates from church membership. Consequently, devising ways for interconnecting confirmation with the time after confirmation has become an important challenge. Christian youth work certainly is the most attractive thing that a congregation has to offer to young

people. Finding a place for youth work in the context of confirmation in order to make confirmation an entry point for continuous involvement with youth work therefore seems a very good idea. (By the way, involving young people after confirmation as volunteer youth workers can also be the answer to the question where one might find the additional personnel that is needed for an enriched way of doing confirmation.)

In concluding this section, I want to briefly mention an additional element of renewal that has emerged recently at least in some German churches. In order to introduce children to congregational life much earlier than at the traditional confirmation age of 14, some congregations now have a first round of confirmation classes at the age of 8 or 9, with a second round at the traditional age of 14. While admission to the eucharist is no longer premised on such classes but also allows for other ways of preparing children for the purpose, childhood confirmation classes tend to focus on the sacraments and on celebrating worship services with children. Given the general situation of Christian education in Germany, this is certainly an important new approach. It is not yet clear, however, if the division of confirmation work into two parts will really work and what implications go along with it. For example, it could turn out to be difficult to have confirmands join such programs twice so that participation rates for the second round will dwindle. Moreover, taking away time from adolescence in order to gain time for confirmation work in childhood could actually weaken the effects of confirmation at age 14. The experiences with the new model will in any case have to be evaluated very carefully before generalizing this model.

4. Changing Views of Children and Adolescents in Church and Theology: Current Developments

Different ways of doing confirmation work can be explained by referring to changes in culture and society but the new approaches described above clearly have a theological background as well. Confirmation work does not only reflect its social environment – it also constitutes a specific theological approach to children and youth. In many European countries and beyond, a remarkable new interest in the relationship between theology and the child has emerged in recent times. Given the explicit reference to ‘child theology’ in the Church of England report *Children in the Midst* (p. 35), I want to suggest a fourfold distinction in reference to the German discussion on how church and theology should view children and adolescents.

First, I understand the ‘*child theology*’ suggested by the Church of England report to be closely related to the attempt of doing theology with a constant eye to the special Christian responsibility towards children as specified

in Mk 9, 36ff. In Germany, this plea for ‘child theology’ has become influential through the corresponding work of the WCC and, for example, through the personal commitment of the German theologian and educator Ulrich Becker who served as educational director with the WCC in Geneva between 1978 and 1985. Some German religious educators have connected this approach to a liberationist perspective by relating it to a so-called ‘option for children’ that parallels the ‘option for the poor’.

Second, there is a new awareness of the *child in Christian thought*. This is actually the title of the well-known collection of essays edited by the American practical theologian Martha Bunge in 2001 but in the present context it also refers to earlier work by other authors including myself. Contrary to many current textbooks in Germany, the history of childhood cannot be understood without ample reference to the Christian tradition. Starting with the Bible itself, Christianity has been very productive not only of highly influential views of children and youth but also of religious and social rites and institutions like catechesis and confirmation that have left their marks on the history of childhood way beyond the ecclesial context itself. Christianity has certainly acted as a midwife for modern childhood as well as for modern adolescence – in some respects Christianity can even be seen as a parent of today’s understanding of these stages of life.

Third, references to the child in Christian thought should not be limited to historical accounts. We clearly need a *theology of childhood*. By this term (which possibly goes back to Karl Rahner) I want to describe the task of developing a theological understanding of childhood and adolescence. A theology of childhood is part of what I call a theology of the human life cycle. This theology entails ethical as well as dogmatic aspects. It specifies the aspects of Christian life and belief in respect to certain ages or stages of the life cycle. While traditionally this kind of theology tended to be limited to theological advice for the individual believer, a theology of childhood for today must give equal attention to contemporary culture and society. Moreover, it must include a critical appropriation of the Christian tradition. As the philosophy of education since Rousseau has pointed out over and over again, the educational models of the past cannot simply be applied to the contemporary situation. Consequently, a theology of childhood cannot draw upon the Christian tradition naively but must constitute itself vis-à-vis modern education and the social sciences. This indicates that a theology of childhood is a serious endeavour that requires interdisciplinary work within theology itself, most of all between systematic theology and practical theology or Christian education. (One of the most impressive examples for this kind of theology comes from the American practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore – her book *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from*

a Christian Perspective, published in 2003, demonstrates the continuing critical and constructive power of a Christian analysis of contemporary images of childhood.)

Theology of childhood, the child in Christian thought, child theology – these demands are certainly important for the future. Yet all of them are in danger of falling short of their own intentions as long as they are not based on a fourth demand that can be called *children's theology*. In 1994, the EKD synod set forth the plea for a 'change of perspectives' towards taking the perspective of the child seriously. In this understanding, children should not be treated as the objects of teaching but as subjects and as active agents in their own right. During the last 10 years, this view has brought about the attempt of doing justice to children's theological capacities as well – capacities not of academic theology but of ordinary theological thinking and problem solving in the context of everyday life. Even at an early age, children are able to formulate their well-known 'big questions' about God, about life and death or about *why* things are the way they are. Yet children are also able to think about such questions themselves and to work towards their own answers. Accordingly, children come up with their own theological ideas (*theology of children*) – they are able to participate in theological dialogues with other children or with adults (*theology with children*) – and they may be open for theological problems that traditionally were held to be too difficult for children, for example, in the context of Christology (*theology for children*).

In sum, confirmation work should do justice to all four approaches – child theology as well as the child in Christian thought, theology of childhood as well as children's theology. Moreover, confirmation work must be aware of the differences between children and adolescents. Much of what I describe above applies to adolescents as well as to children. Yet it must be specified in different ways for different age groups and for different stages of life.

5. Questions for the Future

At his point, I do not want to repeat the various questions raised in the previous sections of my paper. In my understanding, two additional questions deserve special attention in the future.

The first question is an immediate implication of the new appreciation of children and youth in church and theology. Many attempts have been made to put this appreciation into practice, be it in the context of confirmation or in other contexts of Christian education. Yet as mentioned before, our knowledge about the possible success of such attempts is still fairly limited

and insufficient. Most of this knowledge is not based on systematic research but rather comes from the personal accounts of those who are working with children and adolescents on a daily basis. Yet if we take the plea for treating children and adolescents as active subjects seriously, we will have to be prepared to listen to their own voices. Only listening to adults who work with them, is not enough. How do children and adolescents experience confirmation work themselves? How do they want to celebrate confirmation? Which questions should be addressed in confirmation classes according to them? etc. General education and the social sciences have to offer professional methods for taking up such questions in research. I think it will be an important challenge for the future to apply such methods in the field of confirmation work as well – in order to improve this work and also in order to provide a sound basis for church policies.

My second question actually goes back to empirical work with adolescents. In a recent study on dialogical (Protestant-Catholic) religious education in German schools, we had the opportunity to interview 15 year olds about topics like the meaning of denominations, of confirmation, of their own denominational affiliation, etc. One of the striking outcomes of this study can be seen in the widespread difficulties that the adolescents encountered in explaining what it means for them to be Roman-Catholic or Protestant. It seems that confirmation classes do not address such questions. They refer to the Christian faith but they do not explain what is distinctive of an evangelical church. Some observers might consider this observation from our study as encouraging and as an example of the growing ecumenism in Germany. From my perspective, however, this observation clearly points out a shortcoming. In a time of increasing religious pluralism, young people need to know the reasons why it might be better to be a member of one denomination rather than of another and why it does make a difference to which religious community one belongs. If such reasons are not available, the most likely result will not be ecumenism but will only be disaffiliation and dropping one's membership.

In conclusion I want to sum up this last point by saying that the renewal of confirmation and of confirmation work in Germany can be considered successful in taking up the challenges of a changing society. Yet there are additional challenges that the church will have to face up to in the future. Plurality and pluralism confront us with problems that go beyond the existing models of confirmation work. There is a persistent need for renewal, not in the sense of faddish adaptation to an ever-changing culture but in the sense of effective theological responses to the challenges of Christian initiation in the future.

Postscript 2009

After the completion of the present chapter, several empirical studies on confirmation work in Germany and beyond could be carried out. Following the demands described above, they address the children and adolescents themselves, and they also include the many volunteers who are active in this field. International readers may be interested in the study conducted in seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland): Friedrich Schweitzer/Wolfgang Ilg/Henrik Simojoki (eds.), *Confirmation Work in Europe: Empirical Results, Experiences and Challenges. A Comparative Study in Seven Countries*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2010.

For Germany, see: Wolfgang Ilg/Friedrich Schweitzer/Volker Elsenbast in cooperation with Matthias Otte, *Konfirmandenarbeit in Deutschland: Empirische Einblicke – Herausforderungen – Perspektiven*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2009.

Insights into one regional church in Germany, including the new model of confirmation work with children mentioned above, are described in: Colin Cramer/Wolfgang Ilg/Friedrich Schweitzer, *Reform von Konfirmandenarbeit – wissenschaftlich begleitet: Eine Studie in der Evangelischen Landeskirche in Württemberg*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2009.