

# Researching the effects of First Communion preparation

Empirical results of a national survey on religious education in German Catholic parishes in the perspective of religious identity formation

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In times of increasing religious diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism the question of religious identity and belonging becomes more and more important. Learning tolerance and respect for others is closely linked with a search for one's own standpoint and identity in terms of religion. Finding a spiritual home in a specific religious tradition by developing a feeling of belonging seems to be a key to gaining the ability to encounter other traditions. While formal religious education, especially Religious Education at school, widely excludes aspects of affiliation for good conceptual reasons, non-formal religious education in Christian communities provides a specific place for this. However, most empirical research has so far focused on school-based Religious Education yielding a vast number of studies and research projects (cf. Schweitzer and Boschki 2018). In comparison, the field of non-formal education in parishes is a neglected topic in religious education, although to this day offerings like preparation for confirmation – in the Protestant tradition – of adolescents aged 13 or 14 (cf. Simojoki in this volume) and – in the Catholic Church – the preparation for the so-called “First Communion” of children aged 8 or 9 are not only significant in numbers but also very important for religious socialization and religious development in childhood and adolescence.

In this chapter, results from the first national survey on First Communion preparation in Catholic parishes in Germany, conducted in cooperation with an interdisciplinary research team, are presented.<sup>1</sup> In this quantitative as well as qualitative empirical study over a period of more than two years, children and parents were repeatedly interviewed with the aim of determining the effects of this specific form of religious education on the development of religiosity. The results help to explain and to understand the processes and impacts of non-formal religious education in the childhood phase. The chapter discusses some selected results with a spe-

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cial focus on the question of the formation of religious identity (for all details on goals, methodology, results, and consequences see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015).

Before that, however, some terms and basic assumptions should be clarified. Preparation for the First Communion in Germany is not standardised, although there are parallels and common elements in preparation courses. These courses are mandatory and called First Communion Catechesis (FCC). FCC is – formally – the preparation of children for the participation in the Roman Catholic mass, the Eucharist, as part of the initiation process. In Germany, this preparation as well as the celebration of First Communion are organised by the parishes, and children of the age of 8 or 9 participate. Every year, almost 200000 children participate. FCC is often organised in small groups of 5 to 10 children, mostly lead by volunteers (catechists). But also larger groups up to 50 children exist. In most cases, catechists are laypersons (not clerics but men or women), sometimes mothers and fathers of First Communion children who participated in a special training beforehand. Catechists sing with the children of their groups, read the Bible, tell stories about Jesus, introduce children to special prayers and practices. In general, the catechetical process starts in autumn and continues over 9 months culminating with the First Communion celebration.

Concerning the term “Catechesis”, it is important to note that Catechesis is the traditional term for religious education, for the learning and teaching process of people on their way to become baptised or of people who are already baptised (for example as a child) and get further instruction. The term refers back to biblical scriptures. It was first used by Paul (e.g. Gal 6,6), extensively practiced in the early church, and elaborated by the so-called Church fathers (e.g. Augustine). The term is defined in official church documents e.g. by Pope John Paul II: “Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.” (John Paul II. 1979, paragraph 18) This traditional concept follows more or less a “top-down” logic and is perceived as a process to transmit the tradition and the doctrine of the Church to the next generation.

Nowadays catechesis in Germany is in most cases far away from such a narrow top-down understanding. Catechesis is no longer understood as merely teaching in a one-way manner, in which the doctrine is given from ‘above’ and people ‘below’ only have to adopt the teachings of the so-called catechism. Catechesis today is conducted in a dialogical manner in which the people who participate are respected in their own life-world, in which their own life experiences are focused on and where their questions can be discussed as well as their doubts and critical thoughts (cf. Altmeyer, Bitter and Boschki 2016; Kaupp, Leimgruber and Scheidler 2011; Jakobs 2010). Nevertheless, the term “Catechesis” is very much debated. In Protestant churches in Germany, the term is no longer common and no longer used, it has been replaced with Gemeindepädagogik (“religious education in the context of the

parish”; Meyer-Blanck 2016), whereas in the Catholic tradition the term catechesis still plays a central role in Christian education of children, young people and adults in the setting of Catholic parishes.

The authors of this chapter organised a conference at Bonn University where the term and the concept of catechesis in “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) was discussed and a search of a dialogical and encounter-based concept of catechesis for today was initiated. The approach follows the multidimensional model of education (“Bildung”) formulated and conceptualised by Karl Ernst Nipkow. The authors try to adopt this model to religious education in parishes (catechesis). According to Nipkow’s educational theory (Nipkow 1992, 32–36), education can be conceptualised in at least five dimensions: (1) social and public dimension; (2) utopian and future dimension; (3) subject-oriented and identity-related dimension; (4) dimension of religious tradition; (5) dimension of dialogue and encounter. All five aspects have to be seen in close relation in order to realise a broad and holistic approach of education that will not be reduced to the mere transfer of knowledge or moral lessons.

As a consequence, religious education as well as Catechesis today is understood as a multifaceted concept. The main goal of catechesis is maturity and autonomy in religious affairs. At the end of the learning process, learners should have acquired the competence to make the decision whether they would like to continue a life within the church and with God or to follow another path – a decision to be made on their own, free from any pressure. Catechesis neither acts from a neutral standpoint nor from outside of religion but it is realised *within* a distinguished community. It is the attempt to invite (young) people to a special religious way of live, to identify with it and to get to know it from inside.

This is what Hanan Alexander (2009) calls “educating identity”. It focuses on dimensions (3) and (4) of the above mentioned education theory. Religious education in parishes (catechesis) is part of the formation of religious identity as it aims to foster the development of children’s identity through a deep contact with Christian tradition, communion and life. Religious education – and in this case “catechesis” – is always an act of balancing different aims and purposes within the frame of the educational poles of autonomy and identity, community and society, belonging and dialogue (cf. Cush 2014).

## 1. An evaluation study of FCC in Germany

In light of this theoretical background, FCC in Germany was investigated as an important process of non-formal religious education by asking: What is done by professional and voluntary workers involved? Which goals do they have? In which ways do they act? With which results? Formally speaking, an evaluation study was conducted to examine in which way FCC in Germany is practiced and evaluated (process evaluation) and to which extent the predefined goals were achieved (im-

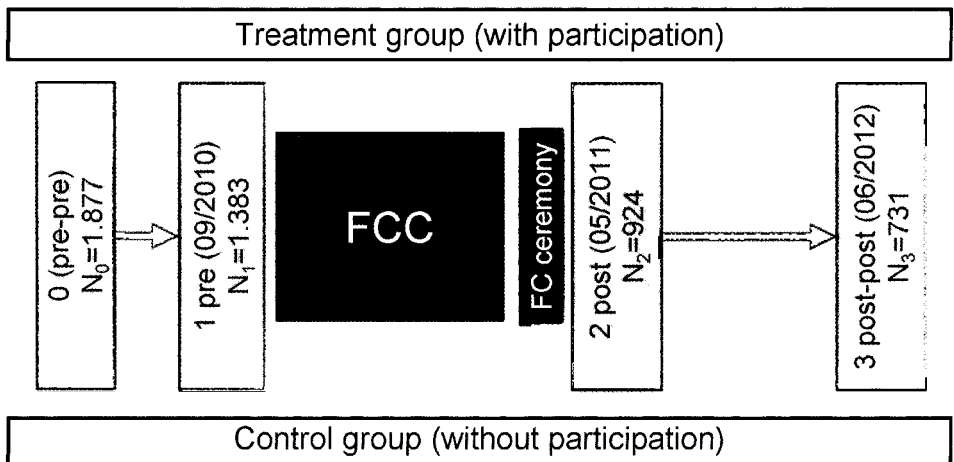
pect evaluation). In order to answer these questions, a nationwide quantitative and qualitative panel study was conducted. This means: the participants were repeatedly interviewed. The aim of the quantitative part was an examination of different hypotheses concerning the impacts of FCC; the qualitative part was supposed to help understand the communicative processes and to find complementary hypotheses which were supposed to be checked by using the quantitative data.

### Methodology

The concept and the arrangement of the study were based on a quasi-experimental pre-post-control group design (Meyer 2007; see Figure 1). The general group of participants for the panel consisted of children living in Germany who were 8 to 9 years old in 2010. The treatment group within this panel were Roman Catholic children who attended FCC in 2010/11. In addition, one parent was included in the study for each child so that a consideration of children and parents became possible. The recruitment of participants was determined by a two-stage random sample. In a first preliminary survey, conducted by an opinion research institute (INFAS, Bonn), 81 municipalities in Germany were randomly selected (weighting by population). In each municipality, a predetermined proportion of children aged 8 to 9 years was randomly selected from the population register. From this random selection, a total number of 1877 child-parent-pairs agreed to participate in this panel study. With regard to regional distribution as well as to religious affiliation, this sample is almost representative of the population in Germany.

Starting from this random selection, three consecutive survey waves were conducted: the first inquiry was held before Catechesis began (in September 2010), the second was carried out immediately after First Communion (in May 2011) and the third inquiry took place one year later. 1383 pairs of children and parents partici-

Figure 1: Survey design



pated in the first quantitative inquiry. The number of participants decreased over the course of time to a total of 924 and then 731 children and parents pairs who participated in the second and the third inquiry. This means that 731 participants could be considered throughout the entire time period of the study. For the qualitative part of the study, three ideal-typical groups of parent-child-pairs were formed by means of a cluster analysis out of which 30 pairs were chosen and interviewed repeatedly. In addition, 165 catechists and 93 priests or lay persons as responsible professionals were included in the survey.

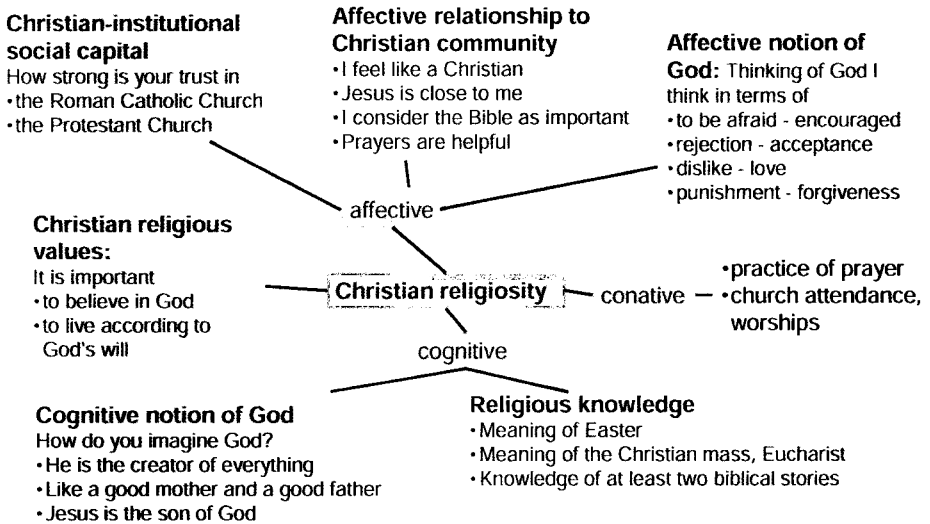
In order to receive valid information about the impacts, the research group drew upon elaborate evaluation research methods (Stockmann 2006). For the quantitative as well as for the qualitative part of the research, it was crucial that not only participants of FCC in 2010/11 were taken into consideration, but also a control group consisting of children of the same age who did not attend any church educational program. Otherwise, it could have been possible that all observations had been due to developments that are typical for this age cohort, rather than being an effect of Catechesis. Parallel to the treatment group, one parent was also included in the study for each child in the control group.

Concerning quantitative methodology, the question of the impact of Catechesis on religious orientation of children and adolescents cannot be answered by consulting isolated items in a questionnaire, e.g.: so-and-so many percent of the participants stated that they attend church services on a regular basis. Incidentally, the 'perceived statistics' of many professionals and volunteers in practice operates in this manner and concludes, for example, that children no longer attend regular church services after First Communion (which is certainly not uncommon) is due to weaknesses of FCC. However, one must consider correlations which are far more complex to reliably decide on absent or existing impacts. In the present study so-called structural equation models were used to meet that complexity (Byrne 2010; Kline 2011). This is a statistical approach which tests and estimates correlations between dependent and independent variables. In general, several theoretical models of how certain variables relate with and influence others are constructed. It is then tested which model matches the data best and leads to a meaningful interpretation. In evaluation research in educational contexts, the focus on a so-called effect variable is central. This addresses the question of which features are supposed to be influenced positively by an educational offer. Using structural equation models, it can be examined whether certain hypotheses concerning what the achievement of such goals depends on are in accordance with the collected data. Furthermore, additional control variables, which also produce effects, can be taken into consideration. As a result, a measure can be indicated (the so-called effect size), which shows to what degree the tested educational offer (or any single factors) influences the effect variable. Amount and +/- sign of the effect sizes can be interpreted. A neutral value of zero means no influence was exerted. A positive value stands for a progression and a negative value for a regression of the effect variable. To give a simple example, regular smoking has been proven to increase the risk of lung can-

cer (effect variable), as well as passive smoking. In both cases, the effect size is greater than zero, but higher for active smoking than passive. Similarly, the impact of an educational activity can be measured and compared.

In order to evaluate the impacts of FCC, the question of the effect variable to be considered had to be identified. Which skills, abilities or attitudes should be developed positively through Catechesis? Concerning this question, the focus was put on religiosity by assuming that the label “fostering of religiosity” can cover most of the goals that are typical for this process of non-formal learning in church. However, religiosity must be understood as a complex reality that includes different dimensions. There are a variety of scales for measuring religiosity (Maiello 2007, 27–36). The scale used here is based on theoretical considerations and was developed for use with children of FCC age. On the one hand, Christian-religious values are separated from Christian-religious attitudes, on the other hand different components of attitudes are distinguished considering affective, cognitive and conative dimensions (Figure 2). The construct generally assumes that religiosity can be described by these factors without postulating certain dependencies. Construct validity testing has yielded good results (for details see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 136–144).

Figure 2: Operationalization of religiosity (effect variable)



Items in the questionnaires were largely taken from already proven scales. However, to be manageable for the children, these scales were only partially used and simplified in terms of language. At the same time, parents and children were asked questions with comparable content. As the research focus was on the children, all the dimensions of religiosity mentioned were taken into consideration for them, while in the parents' questionnaire questions about knowledge and affective attachment to Christianity were left out. This is because the questions were very much

tailored to the children and might seem strange to adults. With a few exceptions, the comprehensive set of questions remained unchanged over the entire research period. To illustrate this approach to religiosity, here are some exemplary insights into the items used in the questionnaire.

- Questions about *Christian religious values* cover the subjective importance of Christian religiosity for life. The children were asked: “Every person has something that is especially important to her/him. How important is it to you ...? (1) to believe in God, and (2) to live as God wants.” The given answers could be rated from “very unimportant” to “very important” by means of a five-level rating scale.
- The operationalization of *affective religiosity* takes into account the following components: the affective image of God, the affective attachment to Christianity and the Christian-institutional social capital. For example, the *affective image of God* was elicited by means of typical pairs of opposites: “When I think about God, I rather think that ... (1) He scares me / He gives me courage, (2) He rejects me / He accepts me, (3) He does not like me / He loves me, (4) He punishes me / He forgives me”. The participants had to specify their own positioning between these poles. The so-called *Christian-institutional social capital* was raised by a question about the trust in the Church. The *affective attachment to Christianity* was measured through the personal evaluation of seven content statements (e.g.: “I feel like a Christian” or “I know that Jesus is very close to me”).
- The assessment of the cognitive dimension in religious attitudes takes into account questions about the *cognitive image of God* and *religious knowledge*. The religious knowledge was captured through the knowledge of two biblical parables and the meaning of Easter or the Eucharist. The cognitive image of God was inquired by rating eight pre-formulated statements about God and Jesus.
- The conative, action-oriented attitude dimension is measured by items on the *practice of faith*. Here the participants were asked about church service attendance and prayer practice, as well as certain prayer occasions.

### *Selected quantitative results*

How does participation in the FCC affect the development of religiosity among children and parents? Using the presented methodological design, it was possible to answer this question and to distinguish between short-term and long-term effects. The short-term effects relate to changes between the first and the second survey wave (Figure 1). In this time, the preparation and the celebration of First Communion took place. One can therefore expect that the impressions of the special event were still present. The long-term effects relate to changes between the first and third wave of surveys. The impact analyses thus refer to the period from the time before the beginning of Catechesis to one year after First Communion. Table 1 shows the results in detail based on complex structural equation models. The underlying models cannot be comprehensively presented here (for details see:

Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 165–184); instead, how participation in FCC affects each aspect of the effect variable for children and parents is reported. These influences become visible and comparable through the values given as effect sizes. Values greater than zero indicate a positive effect; a larger value indicates a higher influence, with the theoretical maximum being 1. In an educational context, the measured effect sizes may all count as high. The model quality (indicated by the value CFI) can also be rated as good meaning that the theoretically assumed dependencies between variables highly agree with the data.

*Table 1: Effects of FCC on effect variables. Results of structural equation models*

Effect variable	Short-term effects of FCC (n <sub>2</sub> =924)		Model quality (CFI)	Long-term effects of FCC (n <sub>3</sub> =731)		Model quality (CFI)
	Children*	Parents*		Children*	Parents*	
Affective notion of God	.13	.08	.98	.11	.05 **	.98
Affective commitment to Christianity	.10	–	.97	.12	–	.96
Christian-institutional social capital	.11	.14	.81	.25	.09	.77
Cognitive notion of God	.07	.04	.96	.06	.06	.94
Religious Knowledge	.36	–	.94	.23	–	.96
Religious Practice	.17	.08	.96	.06	.08	.95
Christian-religious values	.07	.05	.98	.05	.05	.98

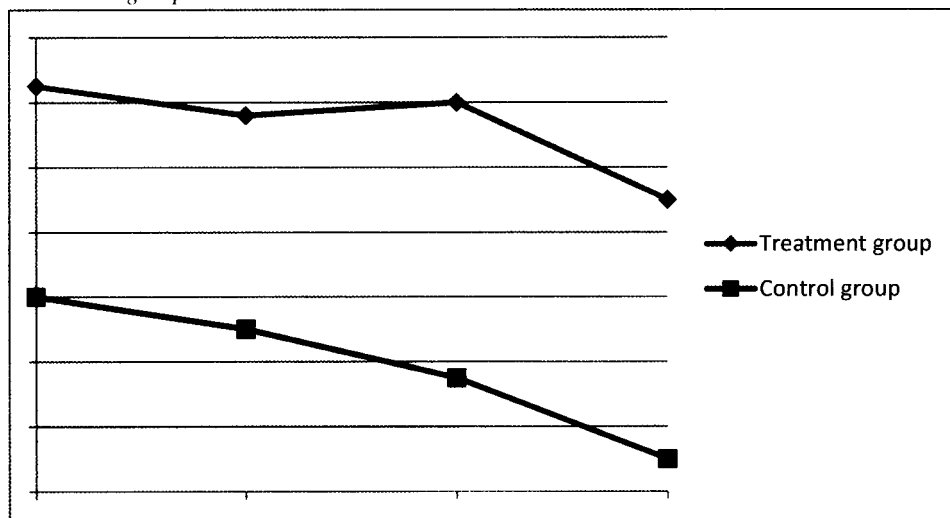
\* Standardised path-coefficient, all effect sizes significant ( $p \leq .05$ ), except for \*\*.

– Effect variable not included

Interpreting the figures, the results mean that participation in FCC influences all dimensions of the children's religiosity positively. This means that the children who attended FCC differ from other children (the control group) with regard to the development of religiosity during the observed period. The effects of FCC on the religious socialization of children are, except for one dimension of religiosity, still measurable even one year after First Communion. In addition, the participation of the children in FCC and the involvement of the parents in Catechesis influence the religiosity of the latter. Significant effects can be found in all considered dimensions of religiosity. However, the effects of FCC on the parents are most of the time weaker than the effects on the children. Still, these effects are – with the exception of one dimension – lasting.

These consistently positive results are highly surprising and encouraging, especially considering that in practice the actors are often highly pessimistic. Many persons involved in FCC are constantly wondering whether the great commitment is worthwhile and whether the high workload can be justified. In another recent study, it was shown that many professional and voluntary catechists see Catech-

Figure 3: Changes in Christian-religious values. Comparison between children of treatment and control group



$t_0-t_3$  in accordance with the survey waves in Figure 1

esis as a major challenge burdened by many conflicts (Altmeyer 2018). In light of this, the results show that the empirical assumptions based on subjective perceptions empiricism does not agree with the actual effects of Catechesis and that they are considered too negative. Nevertheless, the positive effect sizes just reported do not necessarily mean an absolute increase of importance of religiosity in any dimension – the opposite is also possible in some way: the importance of religiosity decreases, but the treatment and control group differ significantly in how strong the loss of importance is. This becomes particularly clear considering in which ways the importance of religious values is changing. As illustrated in Figure 3, the *importance of Christian-religious values* for children decreases in the treatment and control group. This trend is only interrupted but not stopped by participation in FCC. While the importance of Christian-religious values increases among the participating children, a downward trend is measured among the other children during this period. In addition, the analysis shows that both groups differ in Christian religious values even before the Catechesis starts. Thus, FCC increases this difference and slows down the process of distancing from religiously motivated values.

In *religious knowledge*, however, a real increase is recognisable. In the period of Catechesis, there is an above-average increase in knowledge among children participating in Catechesis. After the preparation time, the knowledge continues to grow but much more slowly. A reason for this may be because the scale has a maximum value and with increasing proximity to the maximum, increases are more and more unlikely.

### *Relevant factors with positive effects on development of religiosity*

In all dimensions of religiosity – emotion, knowledge and practice as well as, to a certain extent, value orientation – positive and even lasting effects of FCC could be proven. Now, however, the question is whether this applies equally to all children and families, or whether this depends on certain positive or negative conditions. The complex structure of the quantitative study and the abundance of data make it possible to sort out relevant factors which make Catechesis successful. Table 2 shows a selection of only a few factors (for details see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 149–165). First of all, it is noticeable that a number of factors have no influence at all. Anyhow, these factors are continuously and fiercely under discussion, especially in practical fields, e.g. the duration of the catechetical process, group size or the question in which intervals the meetings take place (weekly, fortnightly, monthly, etc.). Additionally, the fact whether the children of one learning group are already acquainted with each other has no effect. However, positive environments are supportive factors (child feels comfortable, materials are appealing) and above all positive relationships: between the children and the catechists, but also between the parents and the catechists. Particularly, the family appears to be a crucial factor for the effectiveness of religious education in parishes in general. The more the parents' interests and questions are included, the more positive and lasting the whole educational project will be.

*Table 2: Selected factors of FCC and effects on target variable*

Without any effects	With positive effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– duration of FCC</li> <li>– group size</li> <li>– frequency of meetings</li> <li>– children acquainted with each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– positive learning environment (child feels comfortable, appealing materials)</li> <li>– positive relations (children-catechists, parents-catechists)</li> <li>– central factor: the family</li> </ul>

Besides these rather organizational and process-related factors, individual conditions also influence the success of Catechesis. For example, a *gender-specific aspect* was found. Girls evaluate Catechesis and catechists more positively than boys. 87.6% of the female and 78.6% of the male children agree with the statement “The catechist was friendly”. Asked “Did you like going to Catechesis?”, 56.5% of the girls but only 43.5% of the boys answered “always”. Both differences are significant. But is FCC also more successful, depending on whether one looks at girls or boys? To answer this question, the effects of Catechesis on the effect variable were calculated separately for boys and girls which showed gender-specific differences. The analysis is based on the same structural equation models as Table 1. For girls, for example, the influence of FCC on Christian religious values is significant, not for boys. Affective attachment to Christianity is significantly more effective for girls. Thus, the results point out a girl bonus or boy malus, meaning that the aspects of FCC relating to value education and affective aspects are more effectively taught

to girls than to boys (for details see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 317–319).

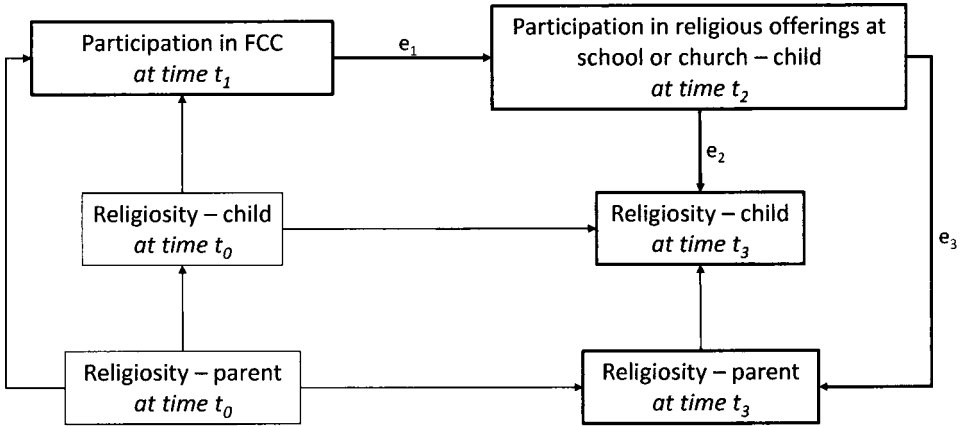
*Family* was identified as a crucial influencing factor, in particular the preferred values and familial religious communication. By means of further structural equation models, it was possible to prove relevant correlations: A strong religious development is particularly evident for those children who can rely on a religious basis in their families even before the beginning of FCC. A religious basis in family can occur in form of a Christian-religious value basis or in form of a family communication culture, in which speaking about religious issues, reading from the children's Bible, celebrating church festivals, etc. is broadly integrated. When religiosity forms an integral dimension in family life, children become acquainted with it and develop their own religiosity in a quite natural way. A family life that is religiously grounded even before the FCC, strengthens religious development. This means that family values and communication culture increase or decrease the chances of FCC in a self-reinforcing process. Children who successfully participate in FCC are before they even begin more religious than others, and this difference is intensified through the catechetical process (for details see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 319–323).

### *Further development*

The positive quantitative results lead to exciting follow-up questions. In particular, it can be assumed that the observed effects fade out over time. And moreover the effects disappear during the transition from childhood to adolescence in accordance with the typical course of religious development (Altmeyer and Hermann 2016a, b). This question was explored beyond the study design outlined above in two small follow-up surveys in the same panel at intervals of one each year. As expected, participation in these additional surveys decreased, but there are still data from  $N_4=518$  child-parent-pairs from the last questionnaire administered (November 2014). The guiding question was: what will happen three to four years after the First Communion celebration, when the children are already 12 to 13 years old? So are there still effects on the religiosity of children or adolescents and parents at this later stage? The question can not be easily answered.

At first glance, it seems that the differences between the groups have almost levelled off. Religiosity is still more pronounced among children of the treatment group than in the control group. However, this is no longer measurable as a direct effect of Catechesis. The preparation for First Communion on its own – independently of the short-term effectiveness – is no longer enough to explain the course of religious development. However, such a finding of a direct long-term effectiveness would have been more than astonishing. Because compared to other central areas of life of children such as school or leisure time, religion occupies a miniscule amount of time.

Figure 4: Model of the relationship between religiosity, participation in FCC and participation in religious offerings at school or church



However, taking a closer look, one still gets a revealing picture. A long-term effect of Catechesis can indeed be recognised, but only an indirect one. To see this relationship, a theoretical model must be constructed that examines participation in FCC for its indirect effects. Figure 4 gives a schematic picture of this model. To answer the question of the effects of FCC on religiosity, only the marked variables and arrows are important. However, the others are interesting and necessary because they show the complexity of the causal relationships. They must be considered in the statistical analysis to achieve reliable results.

Table 3 lists all the results obtained when this model is assumed for all factors of religiosity. The values can be interpreted accordingly: FCC sets an impulse for further religious development. Religiosity fostered in FCC manifests itself in an increased participation in religious offerings at school or church – and this leads to an increase in religiosity of children and partly even of parents. If one took FCC as an isolated learning offer, there would not be a long-term effect after 4 years. Still, it can have a long-term effect, but only in its interaction with other religious offerings at school or church.

Table 3: Effects of FCC on effect variables (4 years after the beginning of preparation,  $N_4=518$ ). Results of structural equation models

Effect variable	Effects of FCC on the participation in religious offerings at school or church* [= $e_1$ in Figure 4]	Effects of participation in religious offerings at school or church (child) on effect variable (child)* [= $e_2$ in Figure 4]	Effects of participation in religious offerings at school or church (child) on effect variable (parents)* [= $e_3$ in Figure 4]
Affective notion of God	.33	.20	.15
Affective commitment to Christianity	.31	.38	–
Christian-institutional social capital	.33	.26	.25
Cognitive notion of God	.36	.14	.21
Religious Knowledge	–**	–**	–
Religious Practice	.26	.96	–
Christian-religious values	.29	.15	.22

\* Standardised path-coefficient, all effect sizes significant ( $p \leq .04$ )

\*\* Religious knowledge no longer considered because original questions were oriented towards 8- to 9-year-old children and might not be appropriate for young adolescents

– Effect variable not included

## 2. Some selected results of the qualitative study

Complementing these statistical analyses, the qualitative interviews aimed to gain insight into the personality of the participants. In letting the persons speak for themselves, one gets a meaningful understanding of the catechetical process. Through a detailed look into individual families and their catechetical constellations, it is possible to interpret the quantitatively measured effects, and moreover to gain new insights into the course of religious socialization in the context of First Communion. In conducting the interviews, the study relied on the personal interview procedure according to Inghard Langer (2000). In contrast to other methods of qualitative social research, this method is characterised by an empathic-accepting interview style and by the congruence of the interviewer. The researcher is more than the neutral expert. His or her behavior is decisive for the coherence of inner experience and external signals. Such an approach promotes authentic presentations and evaluations as well as more in-depth self-exploration of the persons surveyed – as comparable studies show. The evaluation of conversations with parents and children from the treatment and control group led to nuanced family portraits, which traced the religious developments in the context of family relationships and communications (for details see: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015, 280–311).

### *Selected findings*

For the overall study, interviews with a total of six families were intensively evaluated, five of which came from the treatment and one from the control group. A total of 34 half-hour interviews with children and parents following the waves of the quantitative surveys were analysed. Summarising the findings from this enormous qualitative data, it is possible to say that if families support the development of religiosity, the effects of FCC are stronger than in families with weak religious affiliation. The effects concern the following topics:

- *Relationship (closeness) with Jesus and God:* All of these findings suggest that the children's relationship with Jesus and God is changing and deepening during the First Communion preparation and celebration. Just to quote some examples: "It was a moving experience. I had the feeling that Jesus was very close to me." (p. 204)<sup>2</sup> – "God was close to us in our community." (p. 207) – "I learnt more about the Bible and Jesus, I know that Jesus restored sight to the blind." (p. 204, 205) – "God is merciful and nice." (p. 205)
- *Development of the image of God:* Many children show a clear development of their image of God from a childishly naive concept to a more reflected open notion of God. For example: (Child) "I do not believe in God because my mom says God could be anything and I cannot imagine ... that God could be anything. Then God could also be a pencil and I cannot imagine that, or a flower or bed linen or ... I cannot imagine." – (Mother) "I think I'll tell her (my daughter), everyone has to make his or her own image of God, and if you believe it, it will change again in your life, God is not the same for everybody ..." (She also tells that her husband opposes Christian education). (pp. 270–271)
- *Meaning of prayer:* Prayers express a special relationship. God is obviously more than an "idea" to the children. They feel that one can turn to God, address Him personally, and develop a relationship with Him. Some children practice prayer on their own initiative, they know it from the family and develop it further on their own.
- *Importance of First Communion celebration:* The celebration of First Communion is an outstanding event in the children's biography. In most cases it is celebrated as a family event in which the child is the focus and gets special attention by the presence of guests, letters of congratulation, gifts, etc. Such cultural factors together with the experience of the First Communion liturgy seem to be very important for children's religious identity. This could be seen in children's narratives as well as parents' very vivid recollections of their own First Communion.
- *Development of ritual competence:* In the course of the preparation, the children experience and learn a multitude of rituals: to light the group candle, to sing a song at the beginning of the group lessons, concluding rituals, crossing oneself

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers from: Forschungsgruppe Religion und Gesellschaft 2015.

upon entering the church, liturgical rites in devotions and services, prayers of thanksgiving before meals, evening rites in families, etc. Examples: *“I learnt how to go to church, how to sit in church and keep quiet, how to receive the Holy Bread ...”* (p. 224) – *“The catechist did a great job ... I always liked to join the group ... I enjoyed it very much.”* (p. 201)

- *Participation in parish life:* Almost all children interpret the First Communion as a full acceptance into the Christian parish. Some chose to participate in children’s groups or youth groups after First Communion (e.g. altar boys or girls).
- *Religious identity:* It is important to note that the First Communion preparation makes children aware of their own confessional affiliation as one element of their religious identity and of the fact that there is a religious or denominational plurality (difference). On a personal level identity is strongly affected, e.g.: *“It was very nice to see how happy the child is, how the child develops and (...) above all, you also gain an insight into what’s going on in FCC.”* (p. 228)
- *Value orientation:* As noted above, the preparation and implementation of FCC contribute to raising awareness of values and moral behavior.
- *Effects on parents:* As mentioned above, parents who are actively involved in FCC get new impulses for their own religious life and faith. Example: *“The Holy Communion is a place where God and Jesus are very close by taking the (Holy) Bread, and that is the moment in which you can be closest to God. There is no other moment for me in which I can be as close to God as in Communion.”* (p. 276)
- *Effects on religious family life:* Families which have already practiced a religious life before the beginning of FCC adopt new elements for their family life, e.g. rituals, prayers, or songs, e.g.: *“Jesus helps to manage conflicts and offer solutions for our life.”* (p. 209) Families which have *not* been religious before did *not* change their family life.
- *Lack of exchange:* In most cases, FCC lacks inter-denominational and inter-religious aspects.

### 3. Conclusion and discussion

According to these results, FCC can be considered as a central part of a broad concept of religious education that comprises different stages and fields: family, parish, school, religious education for adults, etc. In all of these fields, religious education is closely connected with the questions ‘who we are?’ and ‘to whom do we belong?’ meaning: ‘What is our personal and social identity in religious terms?’ “For all of us in religious education, the questions of identity are central, otherwise the depth and truth of our traditions would not be effectively taught.” (Seymour 2014, 109)

FCC can be understood as an attempt to foster personal religiosity of children as well as the sense of belonging to a specific community. In this sense, the contribu-

tion of this non-formal education offer to the religious education of children could be that believing and belonging are explored in their deep mutual dependency. As seen above, this attempt is quite successful in terms of most dimensions of Christian-religious attitudes and values. However, in times of growing religious diversity and multicultural societies, these certainly most valuable effects must be put into the frame of inter-religious and inter-cultural exchange. “Educating identity” must come together with a “pedagogy of difference” (Alexander 2009).

A first step is personal encounter *within* a specific tradition. This means: “one stands inside a way of life and receives it into oneself” (ibid., 49). “To make life choices intelligently, then, I need to stand firmly within a way of life that offers me guidance in doing so.” (ibid.) This educational process which Alexander describes for the Jewish tradition, can also be applied to the classical process of “Catechesis”. One of the most important goals of FCC is a “deep immersion in the stories and practices of the tradition into which one is being initiated” (ibid., 50).

However, this concept would remain one-sided and exclusive if it would not be related to a “pedagogy of difference” that requires “opportunities to learn of other traditions”: “To understand myself I must encounter the other; but to genuinely encounter the other I must also understand myself.” (ibid., 50)

Julia Iprgrave (2016) views identity learning and learning dialogue as two sides of the same coin. Religious education varies between *auto*-referential and *allo*-referential perspectives (ibid., 54). In the context of Jewish learning she writes: “With *auto*-reference, the Jewish self determines the purposes and character of engagement, and with *allo*-reference, ‘the other’, from a different faith community, shapes the encounter.” (ibid.)

In structural analogy, the following is suggested: Christian Catechesis is *auto*-referential by nature (“educating identity”); but in our time it should be broadened to *allo*-reference as well. Catechesis has to sensitively and seriously initiate encounters with other denominations and religions. This should be a present and future task of Catechesis in general. Summarising the findings on FCC, it is quite successful in preparing children for religious maturity (*auto*-referential perspective). However, during and after the catechetical process, it should sensitise learners for a more and more *allo*-referential perspective.

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