



## Confirmation and Reconfirmations: Sociological Perspective

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### I. CONFESSION AND RECOLLECTION

For all the exception I take to the confirmation process, I regard it as important for its training and its ceremony—this out of my interest in observing social behavior and my concern about the way in which older generations in the church give way to newer.

My recollections of my own confirmation are neither pious nor rebellious, but those Saturday mornings in the cold basement of a small Lutheran church for two entire teenage years remain with me. The trapped looks on my classmates' faces are vivid in my mind. Struggling with our emerging adolescence was fate enough without having to confront turgid prose about the Third Person, articles heaped upon commandments, petitions intermingled with creeds. Why do I still recall pages from the special manual we toted about with our catechisms? There was the chemistry lesson, a bewildering set of pictures of wine glasses, blood, bread, Jesus' body, all intended to clarify the mysteries of con- and trans-substantiation. Or the endless diagrams of three overlapping circles, these to deal with the doctrine of the Trinity. Those were topics which did not press our existential hot spots.

The ecclesiastical initiation was not without its pleasures. I recall fondly our boy-smirks about coveting our neighbor's ass or our glee when one of us would earnestly ask the pastor if he could explain the Holy Spirit once again; we knew that would use up time otherwise slated for recitation of catechism. There were the parental promises of wrist watches at the end of it all, clearly a better deal than the Bibles we knew we would receive from the congregation. There was our collective

relief when we had chanted in unison our stumbling memorization of yet another "What does this mean?" and had at last come to the exit line, "This is most certainly true."

Less happily, I recall the dread which hung over those two years, the knowledge that on "Confirmation Sunday" we would be publicly examined by the congregation. The specter of the taller Mr. Hanson, the older Mr. Tinquist, and our teacher Mrs. Malmquist rising from their pews to designate one or another of us to recite anything in the catechism they chose to ask us was terrifying.<sup>1</sup> And then on the eve of the ceremony I remember my mixture of relief and cynicism when we were given slips with the questions each of us would likely be asked. Two years of memorization were down the drain. Perhaps those last-minute changes in the rules of the game were routine, recognition of the impossibility of the assignment. More likely they were to spare our families and the congregation generally from knowing what dolts we were. The pastor avoided some embarrassment, too. But we initiates would have performed. We were never told

why we weren't asked to.<sup>2</sup>

Years later I would read with fascination Garry Wills' essay "Memories of a Catholic Boyhood."<sup>3</sup> He evokes what it was to be an altar boy, the experience of memorizing bad Latin, the particular stamp that placed upon their pronunciation of certain words. Wills recalls the drama surrounding giving up movies and other childhood pleasures during Lent, the culture of the parochial schools, the ethnic rivalries in the parishes.

My reaction to Wills was envy. Two years of Saturday mornings in a cold basement and some dreary kid choir practices paled in comparison to his way of growing up. But there are similarities. I find it curious how strange fragments of my early memorization come back, how comforting and useful a phrase like "in, with and under, we know not how" can be. Wills' article, my memories, this assignment have combined to make me think about confirmation as a part of the sociology of religion. Those speculations and recent and provocative conversations with some parish pastors are the framework for this article.<sup>4</sup>

## II. THEORY OF RITUAL

For all its boredom, confusion, and loss to the initiates of some prime adolescent time, confirmation has been a definable ritual, worthy of study quite apart

<sup>1</sup>The social control those in power can exert over initiates through such devices as oral examination is interesting. Years later I would be equally fearful at the prospect of dissertation defense. Fraternity hazing in the military academies and board examinations in such professions as accounting elicit the same fears, even among those otherwise certain of their competence. In that respect the old catechetical training was probably useful.

<sup>2</sup>The process by which we found out our questions can be termed *patterned evasion*, the unacknowledged ways that public rules are changed without destroying people's faith in the validity of the organization or the purpose of those rules.

<sup>3</sup>Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy and Radical Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 15-37.

<sup>4</sup>I owe profound thanks to two panels of clergy, persons in the confirmation trenches, who have critiqued my theory of confirmation: my colleagues on the Board for Higher Education and Schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who are pastors, and a group in the area in which I live. By no means would they share all of my willingness to abandon much of adolescent confirmation, but they do acknowledge the need for change in the process.

from the official and pious reasons for the ceremony. Ritual, especially in the adolescent period, is meager, and confirmation has the potential to be high theatre. By ritual I refer to public events, a collective memory which is affirmed, a stress upon the proper re-enactment of that tradition, and an investment of energy and emotion by audience and cast. The coming together of large numbers to see the induction of the young, the mental effort demanded of the confirmands, the legitimation of that knowledge by the pastoral office, the involvement of the family and clan through celebratory dinners, and the bestowal of both secular and sacred gifts upon the initiates all provide ritualistic ingredients. The confirmand, by her combination of age, assumed mental ability, assured demonstration of understanding of doctrine, and expression of commitment has become a churchly adult. (On that matter I speak with deliberate naïveté. Were the new representative of the recent confirmands to raise her voice on most issues discussed in congregational councils, I suspect she would not be made to feel like a churchly adult.) For all of that, confirmation is—at least was—one of the potent social events required in any social system;

it was what anthropologists would call a rite of passage.

The sociological potential of adolescent confirmation would likely have intrigued the eminent nineteenth-century French social theorist Emile Durkheim.<sup>5</sup> Durkheim's contributions to the social sciences are numerous, not least to the sociology of religion. Religion, he contended, had its origins in the need of social groups to come together to assert their solidarity. The supernatural focus of religion is a facade, a rationalization which permits a group to come together to worship its "groupness." Such activities he described as *collective representations*. The sacrament of communion to Durkheim is the taking of the body and blood of the group. Like the laying of hands upon the white-robed confirmands by the congregants, it is a powerful source of solidarity. It is a reminder to the faithful of the worthwhileness of it all.

Whatever the Durkheimian potency of confirmation, I argue that there is little to suggest that it remains a vital ritual in post-modern America, in the socio-economic strata likely to dominate a Lutheran congregation, or in the age-grade I term early adolescent.<sup>6</sup> My reason for imposing my own memories of the process is only to say that for me and probably for many readers the sociological conditions in which we lived were altogether different than those most youth confront today. I described a small town denominationally restricted to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and several fundamentalist and evangelical groups, a rather narrow spectrum of religion compared with metropolitan and suburban America today. The irrelevance of my own experience is striking. Perhaps Garry Wills would say the same about his Catholic boyhood.

I argue that confirmation as presently practiced ought to be radically modified. Perhaps the language of marketing is the best way to explain my thesis. In the relentless competition for the attention of early adolescents, school and

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<sup>5</sup>Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1965).

<sup>6</sup>Adolescence is so vague a term that it is difficult for me to be precise about its divisions. Yet there are internal stages. I describe early adolescence as the period from about twelve to sixteen, the time before these youth likely have a driver's license or job.

workforce have increased their market share. The church has receded and needs to find new niches in which to operate.

An illustration of the market principle is the issue of time, the way in which the weekly calendar is carved up by these competing social institutions. Can one imagine teenage youth willing or even permitted to devote Saturday mornings to catechetical instruction? Such minimum wage service industries as fast food restaurants depend upon adolescent workers. Moving religious instruction to weeknights would still conflict with work and would further require the unlikely resurrection of pacts which used to exist between clergy and school administrators. Those treaties held certain evenings free from the intrusion of the schools, from the power of its coaches and musical directors. Another outdated compromise was the schools' permitting pupils to leave the premises on a weekday to go to area churches for religious instruction. Consider the judicial view today of commingling church activity and tax-supported hours. The church seems left with summer and weekend retreats or other Berlitz-like exposure to its traditions. It is a posture of compromise.

The competition from other institutions is related to another sociological observation. Early adolescents aren't in passage as earlier generations were. The youth of the Protestant

mainline I describe are not going to quit school. The girls are not marriageable until a much later age. Even college is a blurred and less exciting transition. Increasing numbers stay at home and attend community colleges or pursue advanced placement courses while still in high school. The military attracts fewer recruits. School trips or foreign exchange programs detract from the allure of independent travel as rite of passage.

Without the need for confirmation as a bridge to adulthood, indeed without clear measures of adulthood, the purpose for the ceremony obviously changes. Some of the mystique has already been taken away by the practice of child communion, a development similar in its effects to Montessori graduation ceremonies, Suzuki recitals, and child beauty pageants. If early adolescents have already spent some of their ritualistic chips as small children, others are denied them until high school. Then for the talented and attractive there are formidable ceremonies: the making of the team, the homecoming court. Somehow neglected in all this transfer of ceremony are those of traditional confirmation age; they are left with only such uncoordinated and private transitions as the driver's license or sexual experience.

Another sociological change has eroded the function of religion and the seriousness of confirmation, at least in the denominations and parishes which arose out of nineteenth-century immigration. When many Lutherans thought of themselves as ethnic minorities, there was stronger purpose for rituals which solidified the bonds of the group. Today the idea of Lutheranism as a minority, a socially marginal group, seems almost ludicrous in most of its communities and neighborhoods. Indeed, the goal of the denomination now is to become more diverse, to attract people of language and color. Older forms of church humor about Scandinavians or Germans have become politically unwise and socially insensitive.

The theory of marginality is interesting in reference to the American Jewish community. It is substantially more upper-middle class than Lutheranism or most mainline denominations. Yet *bar mitzvah* and its gender-conscious counterpart *bath*

*mitzvah* have far greater ritualistic strength, more of the sense of theatre. This is a function of many forces, of course, but in part it is a sign of the cohesion of a people who have not defined themselves as a part of the mainline. Another example of ethnic marginality and the richness of ritual is the interest in Hispanic parishes in "Sweet Sixteen" masses for their daughters.

### III. PROPOSAL

It is easy to analyze the problem with confirmation; torturous to develop alternatives which will be taken seriously. But I shall propose a plan, one which would restructure the confirmation experience without destroying all of the traditions to which people are accustomed. What I have in mind might be called the continuing education model. The concept with its appeal to lifelong learning has been successful in colleges and universities. I believe it would be so in the churches.

The proposal I make is that we involve children who are in the eighth grade for one year of intensive confirmation instruction. The retreat in the length of the program is a concession to realities earlier discussed. The concentration of instruction would permit attention to some factual knowledge: Bible, church history, comparative religions. Eighth graders still have relative immunity from workplace and extracurricular pressures, a situation likely to change abruptly a

year later. And, on the other side, eighth graders have reasonable background from their schooling for the degree of academic rigor I would expect in their confirmation instruction.

An observation from colleges and universities is worth noting. Many faculty concerned about more effective approaches to teaching are discussing strategies for moving their students away from the stage of dualistic thinking—the cognitive level typical of first-year students. Dualistic thinkers tend to believe that academic questions have right and wrong answers. They need to be moved patiently into a curriculum which helps them to become critical thinkers, to see the correctness of an answer as a function of its question. If dualism describes many first-year college students, obviously it is far more the cognitive level of early adolescents. Thus I would offer a “gently dualistic” curriculum for these fourteen year-olds—somewhat factual and somewhat fieldwork-oriented. The ceremonies of completion should be “full dress,” celebratory, incorporating something of the joy and proclamation of achievement which characterize *bar* and *bath mitzvah*. Such confirmation would serve as antidote to the poverty of ritual in this age group.

That accomplished, the model departs radically from present practice. The ceremony for the fourteen year-olds would in effect be Stage I Confirmation, albeit with a more enticing name. The emphasis then needs to be upon reconfirmations. Browning and Reed, in a provocative chapter entitled “Confirmation: A Repeatable Sacrament,” speak to the same concept.<sup>7</sup>

Reconfirmations could be pursued at any time. Not all who have completed

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<sup>7</sup>Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy: An Ecumenical Model* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1985) Chapter 10.

Stage I will go further, unwilling or unable to go against the culture of the high school and of early adulthood. Reconfirmation education would be a pastoral responsibility, reflecting what pastors are prepared in their seminary education to do.<sup>8</sup> Ethics, theology, and Bible, each perhaps two years of study, would be the core of the curricula. Each course would be followed by celebration of that reconfirmation, by admission into a special order of church membership, by reinfusion of ritual into the calendar of the congregation and into the recipients’ lives.

Perhaps the greatest interest in the preparation for the celebrations of reconfirmation would be among the retired, another age group experiencing poverty of ritual. Consider the enrichment of the lives of older church members if they could be engaged in group discussion and study, could see new purpose in religious involvement. The experience of colleges and universities with non-traditional students and the success of Elderhostel are spectacular models of success in adult education.

It is important, however, that reconfirmations not be restricted to the retired. Some high school students and some younger adults should be enthusiastic to begin the progression of courses and ceremonies which build upon their confirmation and which incorporate their peer group. The creating of intergenerational community in the reconfirmation groups would offset the age-graded profile of participation in much of church life.

The reconfirmation model also provides a plan for involving people in the corporate religious community, for creating active participation from people who are often in passive roles in their church life. The emergence of these new lay orders within the congregation would likely strengthen the parent body. Studies of many complex organizations reveal intricate webs and

networks of smaller groupings, hierarchies of achievement, and recognition of advancement in rank. The proposal is really a variation upon merit badges as entry into higher orders of scouting, of the color and pageantry of the fraternal lodges, or of the accelerating difficulty of examinations and consequent prestige for those who advance through the public accounting and underwriting professions. The model has another theoretical pillar: by reserving some of its greatest honor for those who are older, it speaks to the power of the concept of deferred gratification.

#### IV. SUMMARY

Confirmation presents quandaries. It is a fairly recent development in the life of the church. Perhaps confirmation need not exist at all, though its loss would mark a retreat by the church from one area of education. It is a ceremony which was highly functional when societies had to find ways to mark the transition between youth and adulthood. Subsequently that function came to be assumed by entry into the workforce or by schools and colleges. Today even college graduation lacks that finality, that assurance of adulthood.

Confirmation must find another rationale. It can provide ceremony and

<sup>8</sup>It is another subject, but the focus upon confirmation and reconfirmation education as a core of the pastor's work would likely alleviate some acute problems of role conflict in that profession.

celebration for youth and for their families and friends in a society which is ritualistically impoverished. Because reconfirmations would be pursued only by a limited number of church members, the graduates would come to function as lay societies within the congregation. Such small clusters and orders of committed students of the faith need not be schismatic. On the contrary, they can be catalysts for a more vital congregational life, a remnant within the church.