



Secularisation of Rite of Passage Rituals

A Study on How Danish Teens Created
Inclusion by Hosting a Nonfirmation

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Abstract

Rite of passage rituals have always been significant as they mark our transition from one stage to the next. Despite the low level of religiosity in Denmark, there is a strong emphasis on confirmation - a Christian rite of passage signifying the transition from childhood to adolescence. Since a few decades it is possible to host a nonconfirmation, the non-religious alternative to the confirmation. As the confirmation is an essential aspect of Danish upbringing, this investigation's aim was to determine to what extent nonfirmants' decisions were influenced by fear of exclusion of Danish society.

Through survey questions and interviews, two main themes were elucidated when examining why some Danish teens choose to host a nonconfirmation as opposed to opting out of the celebration. Firstly, hosting a nonconfirmation allowed the teens to (re)-affirm their non-religious identity as they publicly rejected the prevalent cultural Christianity in Denmark. Secondly, inclusion was created by hosting a nonconfirmation. Opting out of a celebration or hosting an alternative confirmation such as a humanist confirmation would lead to more marginalisation than a nonconfirmation, which is seen as a valid substitute.

Finally, the nonfirmants questioned the authenticity of their peers' choice to get confirmed despite not believing. I have argued that the aspects that seemingly take away from the authenticity, namely expensive gifts and an elaborate celebration, are intricate parts of the confirmation ritual if seen through the framework of Danish civil religion. By hosting a similar celebration, the nonfirmants are able to partake in Danish civil religion, despite opposing themselves to the Christian majority.

Introduction

Confirmations are by no means uncommon as a rite of passage ritual in most Christian denominations, but nowhere is the practise as widespread as in Scandinavia and parts of Germany. This is an especially striking contrast when knowing that the Scandinavian countries are considered some of the most secularised in the world (Inglehart, Basáñez and Moreno 1998). Despite this high degree of secularisation, the vast majority of Danes (72% on January 1st 2023, listed on the Folkekirke website) are members of the *Folkekirke* (People's Church) and confirmations are the norm. Yet, in line with the supposed secularity of Denmark, it is becoming more popular to host a nonconfirmation - in essence a 'non-religious' version of the confirmation. The nonconfirmation is virtually an affirmation or proclamation of non-belief (affirmation for those who were not baptised and proclamation for those who were baptised). Thus, instead of affirming one's belief in God, they host a similar celebration of the fact that they do not believe in God. The nonconfirmation is by now one of several alternatives to the confirmation: civil confirmation, nonconfirmation, humanist confirmation, and not hosting any form of celebration.

Since not choosing to host a confirmation is already a decree of non-belief, it is the additional step of hosting a nonconfirmation that is of interest in this study. The abovementioned contrasts of high membership of the Folk Church despite a high degree of secularity suggest an entangled relationship between Danishness and secularisation of the confirmation ritual. Whether such a relationship indeed exists will be explored in this thesis. Specifically, the aim of this thesis is to investigate how ideas of Danish national identity influence the choice to get nonfirmed as opposed to only opting out of the confirmation and foregoing a celebration. For this reason, the focus will be on the lived nature of the con- and nonconfirmation rituals i.e., how they are practised and embodied isolated from their original purpose. In that way, this thesis aims to contribute to theories on religion in a lived context, ideas of nationalism and the relationship between them. However, first it is necessary to understand the role that confirmations have had and continue to play in Denmark.

Origin of the Confirmation

Since 1736 the evangelical Lutheran ritual of confirmation has been the norm in Danish society as well as in the other Scandinavian countries (Bach-Nielsen 2012, 301). The confirmation is meant to confirm one's belief in God that one's parents initially posed during the baptism. Because of this, the

confirmation is also referred to as ‘affirmation of faith’ in English, while in Danish it’s simply called *Konfirmation* (Lutheran Book of Worship 1978, 324). Back in the day, confirmation was a way to inaugurate the youth into adult society. In order to obtain civil rights such as marriage, inheritance, being eligible for military service and being allowed to travel freely, one first had to be confirmed (Ibid, 301). Today, this is no longer necessary and there are debates among ministers whether confirmation is actually necessary as a Christian, since they are not decreed by Christian scriptures (Døssing Gunnertoft 2020). Nevertheless, the ritual remains today as a symbol, for what is referred to as teenagers’ first adult decision. In Denmark, this is usually done at the age of 14 or 15 and in the year leading up to the ceremony, one must attend a class called ‘*konfirmationsforberedelse*’ (confirmation preparation) in which one learns about Christian faith, norms and values (Schweitzer 2017). Often, this class is taken with one’s middle school class and so the confirmation itself is then also done together with one’s classmates. In part because of this, confirmations occur like a collective memory or experience that binds people together.

However, Danish teens are increasingly choosing to perform a nonconfirmation instead. Here, teens actively and intentionally opt out of getting confirmed, but still host a celebration of the decision. In that way, the coming-of-age ritual largely remains intact, except that the ceremony in the church is omitted. This is noteworthy when it is taken into account that Christianity is often seen as part of the Danish identity. Danes tend to experience the Christian identity as a cultural and heritage tradition rather than a personal experience (Storm, Rutjens & van Harreveld 2020) and will often refer to themselves as ‘*kulturkristne*’ (cultural Christians) (Jensen 2021). They use this to describe how Christian holidays and rituals are an integral part of living in Denmark but that in general Christianity is not actively practised. Indeed, if religiosity is measured by church attendance, Danes are classed as some of the least religious in the world (Zuckerman 2009). Furthermore, in Norway as well as in Denmark, the church is seen as a ‘*livsløpskirke*’ (life-cycle church), which refers to the common sentiment that people only go to church four times in their life, namely during their baptism, confirmation, wedding and funeral (Rånes 2020, 211). These rituals are often seen as Danish traditions rather than necessarily something which is done because of personal faith. As such, Christianity has become almost an inherited identity passed on from one’s parents, like nationality and language and thus, is part of the Danish collective heritage (Storm, Rutjens & van Harreveld 2020, 429). A ritual like confirmation is practically seen ‘as an act of citizenship’ (Bäckström 2014, 63). This becomes clear from the fact that while few attend church, it is also uncommon for people to self-identify as atheists (Zuckerman 2009, 66). This is opposite to what Grace Davie referred to as

‘believing without belonging’, which Tromp, Press, and Houtman. instead refer to as the de-institutionalisation of Christianity (Davie 1990; Tromp, Press, and Houtman 2020). In Denmark, as well as in the rest of the Scandinavian countries, societies are characterised by ‘belonging without believing’. Here, individuals are able to derive a sense of belonging and connection to a larger group via the national church without seeing themselves as religious (Kasselstrand 2015). This strong connection between the national folk church and nationalism in Scandinavia should be considered in light of the relatively late separation between church and state compared to many other European countries. This all could indicate that a more secularised form of Christianity exists in Denmark, which could be placed under the concept of civil religion. The term became popular after Robert Bellah used it to describe a sort of national religion in the US in 1966 (Repstad 2009, 200-1). It is not always connected to religious notions but it can be; examples include symbols such as national flags (Warburg 2009, 37). The con- and nonfirmation rituals may well fit into this narrative.

Finally, a note on terminology must be made. In this thesis, I will mainly use the term ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular’, as opposed to ‘atheist’. As explained by Jarnkvist (2020), the terms ‘atheist’ and ‘humanist’ are often related to a certain conviction vis-à-vis the existence of a God, while ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular’ are associated with more ambiguity and indifference. Furthermore, non-religious is not understood here as the opposite of religious, but rather as distancing from religious practises and embodiment. The choice of employing the non-religious terms is largely due to interview participants characterising themselves as non-believers. For this reason, I will use ‘non-religious’ when describing a person, while ‘secular’ will mostly be applied as the verb e.g., when speaking of the secularisation of the confirmation ritual. In some instances, the two terms may be used interchangeably.

Objectives

The aim of this research will be to gain insight into if and how the rite of passage rituals con- and/or nonfirmation are tied to ideas of being Danish. It will be argued that confirmations make up a part of Danish civil religion and that by using the conceptual framework of civil religion, the nonfirmation can be understood as also taking part in Danish civil religion despite opting out of the mainstream Christian narrative. In that way, this research aims to contribute to current research on religion and nationalism by elucidating the complex role of religion in Denmark. Namely, it will be considered

how Danes see themselves as strongly non-religious while simultaneously emphasising the significance of the confirmation rituals and their Christian heritage. Through the civil religion framework, it will be examined how this heritage is tied to Danish nationalism and therefore, teens can include themselves in Danish society by hosting a nonconfirmation, despite choosing differently from their peers.

So far, remarkably little research has been done into confirmation and at the present moment, there is just one academic article addressing nonconfirmation by Kasselstrand et al. (2018). They found that the main predictor for nonconfirmation was teenager's own secularity, while a main reason for confirmation is the parents' or grandparents' faith. This raises the question whether it is as simple as marking one (confirmation) as religious and the other (nonconfirmation) as non-religious. As in most cases, it is likely not possible to make such a clear-cut division between the two. As mentioned, the framework of Danish civil religion will be used to accurately capture this ambiguity. In this context, this refers to the idea that while the confirmation originates from Christianity, it has been given meaning in Danish society beyond its religious connotations. This means that the ritual is often not performed for the sake of religious belief but rather due to it being a Danish rite of passage ritual tradition and the feeling that this is simply something everyone does when growing up in Denmark.

To understand the abovementioned factors, the following research questions will be addressed: 'Do ties between Danish national identity and the Christian confirmation ritual influence whether teens choose a nonconfirmation celebration as opposed to simply not getting confirmed? If so, how do these linkages influence the decision?' So far, it has been shown that on the one hand, those who do not get baptised are less likely to baptise their own children and the same goes for nonconfirmation (Leth-Nissen and Trolle 2015; Kasselstrand et al. 2018, 98). Thus, it is likely that nonconfirmations will increase. On the other hand, humans tend to categorise themselves relative to one another, and (cultural) Christianity is seen as an identity marker for Danes. With those factors in mind, the main research question will be addressed by help of the following sub questions:

- Which reasons do teens give for getting nonfirmed instead of confirmed?
- How do the nonfirmants ascribe meaning to their nonconfirmations?
- How do the nonfirmants characterise themselves in terms of the 'believing without belonging' vs 'belong without believing' theories by Davie?
- In what ways might the *konfirmationsforberedelses-forløb* influence whether someone chooses to get confirmed or nonfirmed?

These questions will be investigated through an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2020). For this purpose, **an online survey will be conducted**, followed by online interviews to elaborate on the survey responses. It will be argued that by hosting a nonconfirmation celebration, Danish teens are able to partake in Danish civil religion and thereby avoid excluding themselves from mainstream society, despite choosing differently from their peers.

Finally, this investigation will be outlined as follows: Firstly, the nonconfirmation will be contextualised in the broader field of alternative or secular rituals. This will examine why alternative or secularised versions of prevalent rituals are important. Subsequently, the conceptual framework of civil religion will be contextualised to Denmark after which the methodological steps will be outlined. Here, justifications will be provided for the chosen methods as well as an explanation of the steps taken in practise. The data will be discussed across two chapters, as two main themes were found to contribute to why the nonconfirmation ritual is significant to Danish teens. Finally, the findings will be summarised and future research will be suggested.

How Can Rituals be ‘Secular’?

Introduction

Rituals play a crucial role in people’s lives, whether they are religious or not. To get an understanding of how to approach the increasingly common ‘ritual’ of nonconfirmation, it is useful to understand the state of the art when it comes to secular, alternative or non-religious rituals. The choice for looking at the broader scope comes from the relatively scarce literature on nonconfirmation itself. In addition, by looking at other ‘secular’ rituals, we may already gain insight into whether a distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ ritual is possible, and what motivates people to choose the ‘non-religious’ alternative. Thus, the nonconfirmation ritual will be placed in the broader context of originally religious, often Christian, rituals turned into ‘secular’ rituals.

In the field of ritual studies, Arnold van Gennep’s book *The Rites of Passage* written in 1960 truly laid the groundwork for understanding rite of passage rituals. These kinds of rituals are used to mark a change in one’s life, traditionally where someone leaves one group and becomes part of a new group. Van Gennep (1977) noted how life transitions or status changes such as baptism, marriage or death are in most societies accompanied by ceremonies meant to aid in that transition. Confirmations and nonconfirmations fall into that category as well, specifically as initiation rituals. During such rituals, van Gennep held that there is a period of time (and sometimes space) where one is suspended between two groups. This is what he called the liminal phase, as it is most commonly known as today (ibid. 1977). This liminality, rooted in the Latin word *limen* —meaning threshold—, describes a state where one has left a social status, such as ‘child’, and entered a new status, such as ‘adult’. Clifford Geertz (1960, 1801) also referred to this period as ‘social death’. During the liminal phase, in the above example, the teenage years, a person carries characteristics of both groups, but is not fully part of either. Young (1965), also building on van Gennep’s work, pointed out that by heightening the emotional intensity of rite of passage rituals, a ritual helps alleviate tension associated with the liminal phase. In that way, rituals serve to make such group transitions easier. This structuralist view on ritual can likely be applied when asking why Danish teens chose a nonconfirmation instead of foregoing a confirmation, as it may aid in the transition from child to young adult.

In the abovementioned cases, rituals serve individual purposes or that of smaller groups of people. However, rituals are also involved in a broader context of politics and the nation. In the combined work of Kustermans et al. (2022), Alvina Hoffmann describes how rituals are used to reinforce ideas

of authority. They detail the notion of voting as ritual and as a way to reinforce ‘[the] sacred, if fragile, lines of distinction between authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes.’ Furthermore, the act of campaigning often involves politicians equating themselves with ‘the people’ i.e., the population of the nation. In those ways, the ritual of voting (re-)establishes the authority of democratic institutions and thereby the nation (2022, 24). Confirmations similarly exist in the public space, even though the celebration event is usually a private affair. Nevertheless, confirmations and nonconfirmations are mentioned in the news every year and there are options to donate money for those who do not have sufficient funds for the celebration (Holmboe and Siegumfeldt 2023). This latter point illustrates the importance that the ritual holds in Danish society.

Secular Ritual as an Analytical Term

While the above illustrates some important aspects of rituals, it should be determined, whether a ‘secular’ event such as the nonconfirmation can be understood as a ritual, or if rituals are by definition always religious. According to Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, the term ‘secular ritual’ is not an oxymoron. They first describe the phenomenon in 1977 in their book *Secular Ritual*, where they use the term to refer to non-religious rituals. They viewed this as ‘If sacred is understood in the sense of “unquestionable” and traditionalising, then something may be sacred, yet not religious.’ (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 20). Furthermore, Strathern and Stewart (2009, 1), in their opening comment in the special issue on ‘Transforming the Self in Public Ritual’, describe ‘sacred’ in the context of rituals as ‘reals of significant public value’. By adopting the wider category of the ‘sacred’, Moore and Myerhoff argue that both religious and secular rituals can be described as rituals. Thus, a framework with four categories arises as illustrated by figure 1.

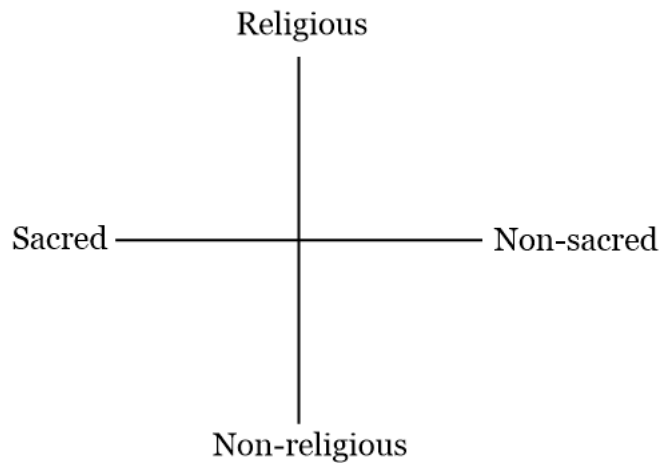


Figure 1: Myerhoff and Moore's concept

At first glance, it appears that the framework presupposes a clear distinction between religious and non-religious, and sacred and non-sacred. This is dangerous since many of us would struggle to draw such clear boundaries or there may be ambiguous cases. However, as the framework draws a continuum, it does largely cover this grey area. Nevertheless, it may still be difficult to place events, objects or behaviours since some may have both religious and non-religious, and sacred and non-sacred aspects.

In her case study of Danish graduations from the upper secondary school, Warburg (2009) exemplifies how the application of this framework can indeed prove difficult. She attempted to apply Moore and Myerhoff's framework to Danish graduation ceremonies. The ritual analysed here, is performed by graduates of the upper secondary school. On the day of their final exam, they receive their graduation cap and a few days later, go on a so-called graduation ride. This includes a ride in an open truck and visits to each other's homes for food and drinks. During this ritual, Warburg identified religious symbols such as the cross the graduates wear on their caps. She points out that the religious symbol is displayed during a ritual, which she determines to be of secular nature. Instead of a cross, graduates can also get alternative symbols fitted on their caps, such as the Star of David, a crescent or a maple leaf. This, Warburg argues, exemplifies that the symbol on the cap is generally seen as a religious one, yet, this is not enough to assert that the whole object is religious (Warburg 2009, 36). In fact, any traditions performed with the cap involve physical challenges with alcohol and, thus, have no religious connotations. Thus, on the one hand, Warburg determines that the cap falls into the non-religious end of the framework of Moore and Myerhoff. On the other hand, the graduation cap holds a central place in the graduation ritual, as it is placed by an important family member on the head of the graduate when they complete their final exam. Additionally, the colour of the band around the cap

signifies from which education a person graduated and depending on the challenges a graduate has completed, certain shapes are cut inside the cap. Despite the fact that the object itself is not religious, it comes to be revered and almost leads to the cap being moved to a kind of ‘sacred’ placement. According to Warburg, this makes it especially difficult to place the cap in any one category. To call it sacred and non-religious, ignores the religious symbolism, but to call it sacred and religious, only because of the symbol, does not make sense either. With the ambiguous nature of the graduation, Warburg challenges Moore and Myerhoff’s categories and states that they, in this case, overcomplicate the analysis of the graduation ritual as opposed to aiding it (2009, 37).

Even though Warburg explicitly chose not to use Moore and Myerhoff’s ‘secular ritual’ categories, she still shows clearly how to apply the categories. In addition, it is good to consider the fact that some cases may be ambiguous as this may also be the case for the nonconfirmation celebration. Finally, the ‘secular ritual’ framework raises the question of whether there is any use in distinguishing between the religious and secular rituals at all.

Can and Should Religious and Secular Rituals be Distinguished?

In addition to considering ‘secular rituals’ as a useful analytical term, a noticeable portion of the literature within non-religious or alternative ritual practises discusses to what extent there is anything to be gained from distinguishing between religious and non-religious rituals (Warburg 2009; Platvoet 2006; Charles et al. 2021; Gordon-Lennox 2017; Lüddeckens 2018). The necessity to distinguish religious and secular rituals is especially contested by Charles et al. (2021) and a number of authors, who contributed to the book *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies* edited by Gordon-Lennox (2017). Charles et al. argue that what is seen as the distinguishing factor between religious and secular rituals is, that religious ones contain something sacred. However, if Moore and Myerhoff’s conception of secular ritual is to be used, then sacred and non-religious are not mutually exclusive, which makes such a distinction obsolete.

Authors of the book *Emerging Rituals in Secular Societies* raise similar points. While not an actual sequel to Moore and Myerhoff’s *Secular Ritual*, reviewers have noted that the latter book began the conversation on secular rituals, while the former is the continuation of that conversation (Group 2018; van Ommen 2018). Though, there is also the critique that ‘secular’ is not clearly delineated and examples of Eastern religious concepts and practises are used, the edited volume by Gordon-Lennox

argues that non-religious rituals differ marginally or not at all from religious ones and thus both can be analysed in the same way. It should be noted, that in their review, van Ommen implicitly defines secular rituals as those lacking references to the transcendental or the Divine (2018, 194). Seeing as the nonconfirmation celebration essentially mirrors the celebration that follows a church confirmation, and the preparation for the celebration itself is similar, there is also little reason to distinguish the two.

Nevertheless, there is a pervasive view that secular rituals are different from religious ones, and this view appears to cause some to see secular rituals as less important or research worthy. This leads many authors to emphasise the significance and usefulness of the secular rituals they have researched as if their value is lessened if there is no clear practical purpose (Lodge 1999). Especially, Charles et al. and the contributors of *Emerging Rituals in Secular Societies* emphasised the power of rituals to create social cohesion, feelings of bonding and affection towards other people. By perhaps overemphasising the positive experiences and the potential for increased social bonding, the authors, as pointed out by Group (2018), neglect the ways in which secular rituals can similarly promote social exclusion. There are those who either refuse to participate in the rituals or those who are excluded by the organisers, such as those unwanted by certain churches, such as LGBTQ+ people (Rejkowska 2021). This latter point might be less of an issue with secular rituals, although groups can be exclusionary and homophobic for reasons unrelated to religion. The potential exclusion described, however, may indeed be something experienced by those not wishing to get confirmed and could be a reason for them to wish to host a similar celebration.

The Significance of Secular Rituals

The ‘why’ behind hosting a nonconfirmation is central to this research. As mentioned in the previous section, teenagers’ choice of a nonconfirmation may be related to feelings of exclusion as the rest of their peers host a confirmation. Kasselstrand et al. (2018a) carried out an investigation of why some Danish teens chose a nonconfirmation over a confirmation. They found that the main predictor behind choosing a nonconfirmation was whether the teenagers identified as atheist. Meanwhile, a main reason for confirmation is the parents’ or grandparents’ faith. In their study, they limit their focus to teenagers who are ‘not immigrants from non-Christian societies and who are not members of a non-Christian faith...’ (2018a, 88). However, this group especially is interesting to include, since they may wish to legitimise their inclusion in Danish society exactly via carrying out the secular version of the common confirmation ritual. While similar rites of passage rituals are carried out in other religions, their timing

likely does not coincide with the confirmations. In addition, while Kasselstrand et al.'s research is a vital part of this investigation, it lacks the deliberate dimension that is at the heart of this research, namely the intentional act of celebrating a nonconfirmation (when this could be seen as superfluous).

As Kasselstrand shows, confirmations are strongly influenced by a teenager's parents. According to Gordon-Lennox, the same can be said for humanist confirmations (2017). According to *Danmarks Statistik* (Denmark's Statistics) the percentage of confirmation has been relatively stable at 66% between 2020 and 2022 (Løvgren 2023). However, since the first humanist confirmation in Denmark in 2010, the number of humanist confirmands has increased from 11 to 540 in 2022 (Humanistisk Samfund 2022; Østerby 2022). One of the organisers stated that while their family is not religious, they still find the rite of passage to be an important occasion in young people's lives (Ibid., 101). Thus, the sense of occasion and the marking of the occasion is of particular significance. Whether this also applies for nonconfirmations, is yet to be determined.

The wish to 'mark to the occasion' appears prevalent when it comes to secular or alternative rituals in general. This is illustrated by the research of Agata Rejkowska (2020), who investigated why people in Poland chose humanist marriages over civil marriages or a religious marriage. It may be useful to explain the differences between a civil and a humanist wedding. A civil wedding, on the one hand, is performed by a government official and is therefore by many seen as more of a formality than a celebration. Additionally, in many countries, a civil marriage is mandatory for it to be legally recognised. A humanist wedding, on the other hand, has been defined as 'a commitment to the value and power of human beings, often to the exclusion of religion' (Davie, Catto, and Woodhead et al. 2016, 568). Humanist weddings are only legally recognised in a number of countries, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland and some part of the United States.

Rejkowska found that the main reason people chose a humanist wedding is to avoid being hypocritical regarding their beliefs and simply going through the motions of something the celebrants do not actually believe in. By hosting a humanist wedding instead, Polish couples in Rejkowska's (2020) research were able to celebrate the beginning of their marriages in a way that aligned with their views and values. However, the reasons that non-religious versions of rite of passage rituals such as weddings are on the rise is not only due to people not believing but because they want a ceremony detached from institutionalised religion. In such a case, couples wish to distance themselves from the Polish Catholic Church while still wanting to have Christian elements featured in the wedding ceremony. A final reason couples chose a humanist wedding was, that it is simply the only way for

them to have a wedding at all. This group mainly includes divorcees and people from the LGBTQ+ community, who are not allowed to have a Church wedding, or even a civil one, due to Poland not recognising same-sex relationships (Rejkowska 2020). As mentioned previously, people from non-Christian backgrounds might chose to host a nonconfirmation for similar reasons.

Kasselstrand (2018b) conducted a similar investigation on humanist weddings in Scotland, again with an emphasis on why people chose to perform those as opposed to a civil marriage. Just like Rejkowska, Kasselstrand determined the main reason for choosing a humanist wedding was people's wish to host some form of celebration and ceremony without compromising their individual values. Some of the participants of Kasselstrand's research even called it inappropriate or disrespectful to believers to have a church wedding while not actually believing in God, unless done out of respect for a religious family member or friend. This was pointed out by both interviewees who were religious and those who considered themselves non-religious. A reason for this, according to Kasselstrand, is that Scots, unlike Scandinavians for example, view churches exclusively as places of worship and not a place for cultural ceremonies or ceremonies that do not support those religious beliefs. Additionally, certain religious elements, such as prayer, are not fully excluded to still honour those who believe and view marriage to be binding by God. While a civil wedding can also include this, many feel that it lacks individuality and flexibility. In addition, participants found civil weddings to be too informal or in other cases just going through legal questions, making the wedding feel like a court hearing and more like a 'legality than a celebration' (Ibid. 2018b, 287). This could also be the reason why civil confirmations are rarely considered among the alternatives to a Church confirmation. Since nonconfirmations do include a celebration, in this manner people can publicly confirm and legitimise their choice, as opposed to restricting that opportunity only to those getting confirmed.

Conclusion

Since Arnold van Gennep first published his book on rite of passage rituals, much research has been conducted on rituals. A major breakthrough was Moore and Myerhoff introducing the analytical term "secular rituals" and from this deriving that it may be beneficial to view rituals as a matrix of religious, non-religious, sacred and non-sacred. Although Margit Warburg determined that there are ambiguous cases that do not fit this matrix, it does make it possible to look at rituals, which are not religious, but still contain 'sacred' elements. While this new focus on secular rituals sparked some interest at first, still relatively little attention has been paid to non-religious rituals. One reason for this is, that it is

being debated whether distinctions should be made between religious and secular rituals and if so, how should secular rituals be analysed. Most researchers who study 'secular rituals' argue that since no definable differences can be found, there is no need to treat religious and non-religious rituals differently. As mentioned previously, the celebration aspect of the con- and nonconfirmation are very similar, so there, too, there is little discernible distinction that can be made.

In addition to questioning the usefulness of distinguishing religious and secular rituals, the main interest of the study of secular rituals revolves around, why people chose those instead of religious or in some cases civil alternatives. As mentioned, Rejkowska (2020) and Kasselstrand (2018b) both identified sticking to individual values as being a main reason for choosing a humanist wedding over a church wedding. When looking at why humanist weddings were chosen over a civil one, respondents are quoted as still wanting to 'create a sense of occasion'. In that way, it is being recognised that while the option for simply opting out of certain rituals might be possible, often people want to be included and wish to legitimise their choices and actions. This provides an interesting point of departure when it comes to why some Danish teens are choosing a nonconfirmation instead of simply not getting confirmed. Furthermore, it will be considered whether a wish for inclusion is related to ideas of being Danish, and being included in Danish society at large. Inclusion, group participation and community are strongly emphasised in the *Folkeskole* (folkschool i.e., Danish middle school). The next chapter will propose to consider these aspects through the lens of civil religion.

Civil religion in Denmark

Introduction

While ‘secular ritual’ initially provided a clear starting ground for the research on nonconfirmation and appeared useful as an analytical term, research by Warburg suggests, that it may not be so appropriate in the Danish case (2009). Additionally, most of the aspects that characterise confirmation as a ritual, i.e. preparing via *konfirmationsforberedelse*, the procedure of confirmands confirming their faith in the church and reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed, are not present during nonconfirmations. This is not to say, that all repeated elements disappear when a nonconfirmation is performed instead of a confirmation. As an example, it is still customary for the nonfirmand to give a speech of their own, regarding their choice and ‘becoming an adult’. Additionally, similar decorations are used for both celebrations such as small paper Danish flags on all the tables.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the main ritual element, i.e., that of saying ‘yes’ to God, has not been carried over to the nonconfirmation, as there is no clear point in time where the nonfirmand publicly states they do not believe in God. Therefore, the main ritual element largely disappears when comparing nonconfirmation with the original confirmation. Additionally, as explained in the previous chapter, Margit Warburg shows how sometimes objects can be quite ambiguous when trying to define them as either sacred, religious, non-religious, or non-sacred. Her example of the graduation cap being a non-religious object, while still containing religious symbols shows how Moore and Myerhoff’s secular ritual comes up short in the case of certain Danish traditions (Ibid.). As described in the introduction, Danes have created a ‘belonging without believing’ or what can also be understood as ‘cultural Christianity’. Cultural religion is a way of conceptualising ‘phenomena that sit ambiguously at the boundary of religious and nonreligious cultural forms’ (Astor & Maryl 2020). As further explained by Lundmark and Mauritsen (2022), the concept is used to interpret a form of religion based on shared cultural values as opposed to being based on explicit religious belief. In this way, the concept of cultural religion acknowledges, that no clear distinction can be made between culture and religion yet can help us understand the high church membership and low religiosity in Denmark.

In order to fully appreciate the nuanced ways in which cultural Christianity comes to the fore in Denmark, I have chosen to analyse the case of nonconfirmation using the conceptual framework of ‘Danish civil religion’. This follows directly from Margit Warburg’s example and includes a number

of underlying presumptions. These presumptions include what ‘civil religion’ entails as well as what makes it specific to the Danish case, both of which will be outlined in the rest of this chapter.

Civil Religion as Proposed by Robert Bellah

Civil religion was first coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and was meant as a ‘political religion’ in which citizen’s loyalty belonged to the state instead of to religious institutions (Hvithamar and Warburg 2009). This was rather contested seeing as Rousseau’s *Religion Civile* implied that the state condoned violence against those who challenged it (Ibid., 2). Hence, the concept was rejected and ignored until Robert Bellah published his article ‘Civil Religion in America’ in 1967. Different from Rousseau, Bellah saw his idea of civil religion not as a philosophical concept, but an empirical observation based on American politics and its public discourse. In particular, Bellah based his findings on mentions of ‘the transcendental’ in the inauguration speeches of a number of American presidents, such as George Washington and Lyndon Johnson (Repstad 1995, 159). Together with these references, he points out the underlying American belief that America has a special relation to God (Ibid., 162).

Similar to when Rousseau published the original concept of civil religion, Bellah’s conception was seen as quite controversial. It was particularly criticized for ‘reflecting the ideology of the Old Protestant elite’ (Hvithamar and Warburg 2009; Hughey 1983, 157-170). Nevertheless, the idea of civil religion is generally accepted within sociology, although not necessarily with the definitions and consequences of Bellah’s initial conception. Instead, Hvithamar and Warburg’s definition will be used here, who state that within the sociology of religion, civil religion is understood as the nation state being the central sacred element (2009, 1). Hence, by association with the state, other things are also viewed as sacred. An example of this are flags. In Denmark especially, the flag (*Dannebrog*) is treated with great reverence and there are several guidelines regarding when it can be hung out (either at 8:00 or after sunrise), taken down (always before sunset) and how this must be done. While there is no legislation regarding the use, the previous examples are considered respected regulations, as per the Ministry of Justice website. An additional example is that the flag must absolutely not touch the ground when being lowered and must be folded neatly before storing it. The treatment of flags shows how parts of the state, such as flags, can become part of civil religion.

A final thing that is important to note is that while Bellah considered civil religion an obvious empirical observation, in most cases it remains an academic term. As Warburg has pointed out, people do not identify themselves as followers of civil religion in a certain country, but it is an academic concept, which can be useful for analysing certain phenomena (2009, 37).

Danish Civil Religion

While civil religion as proposed by Robert Bellah has both proponents and opponents, the fact remains that Bellah's case study was centred around America and American values. Since America is rather unique in terms of its religiously diverse population, Bellah's findings should not carelessly be generalised. What is especially important to note here is that the outset scenarios in the U.S. and in the Scandinavian countries are very different in terms of state-church separation. There is a rigid separation between church and state in the U.S. while the opposite is true for Scandinavian countries (Furseth 1994). Most Scandinavian countries have close ties between church and state and Denmark, in particular, has no formal separation between the two institutions. This means that the church is funded by the Danish state and that church membership through specific church taxes. In addition, the church is also responsible for birth registration and must approve the names given to a child. These things will already change how religion, specifically Christianity, is perceived and talked about by Danes. An example of this can be found under what the Danish Minister of Culture proposed as the '10 Danish values' in 2016 (Regeringen, 2016). Among these 10 values, Christianity was mentioned, which referred directly to the paragraph in the Danish constitution that declares that the official church of Denmark is the Christian *Folkekirke* (People's Church).

The question still remains, if and how the concept of civil religion can be adapted in a way that emphasises values, which are important in Denmark and thereby making the concept applicable in the Scandinavian or Danish context. A number of researchers have proposed how this should be done. Firstly, Niels Reeh argues that civil religion in Denmark should be viewed *not* in the Bellah's Durkheimian way, but by using the government as a conductor of civil religion and acknowledging the role played by citizens in the political realm (2011, 236). Thus, while Bellah looked at civil religion as a societal observable, Reeh insists that the agency of the state should be taken into account. Additionally, Reeh emphasises that 'the state' should not be confined to the government, but must include its citizens. Reeh analysed Danish flag days to illustrate that civil religion in Denmark can and should be understood as an official state myth. To clarify, Danish flag days are days with special

national significance on which state authorities fly the Danish flag on government buildings and buses, often leading to private citizens partake. This occurs on certain holidays such as Christmas Day, Ascension Day, Occupation Day, Denmark's Liberation Day and Constitution Day, but also the birthdays of adult Danish royals. On the basis of this, Reeh has argued that civil religion must take into account the citizens of a state as well as the state itself when identifying propagators of national civil religion.

When outlining how citizens make up the state, Reeh points to how citizens identify themselves with the state and take responsibility for their country and its actions. He gives the examples from sports and politics that: 'After a football match, Danes will say: "We won"; politicians will say, "We have to be able to compete with the Chinese," etc.; and with respect to history Danes will say that "We were occupied by the Germans during the Second World War."' (Ibid., 243). A similar interpretation has previously been put forth by Riis, who shows how civil religion can be found in discourse about Danish football stars. The most common myth regards how the underestimated Danes manage to win a competition through improvised ploys rather than strategic plays (Riis 1985, 24). This is rather reminiscent of the story of how the flag fell from heaven during the battle with Estonia in 1219 and suddenly the Danes won. These sorts of national myths and assumed characteristics of Denmark and being Danish can be related to con- and nonconfirmation. This can be related to nonconfirmation in the way that confirmations are something often unquestionably performed in Denmark. They would rarely strike Danes as particular while outsiders, particularly of Christian backgrounds, tend to be surprised. When explaining this thesis topic to classmates, I explain that in Denmark most 14-year-olds do a con- or nonconfirmation as a rite of passage to Danish adulthood, and in such a way is viewed 'as something one does growing up in Denmark'.

Reeh's view of how civil religion in Denmark is maintained is but one way of looking at it. As Fruseth describes it, civil religion is a fusion between religious and political institutions and has two main dimensions, namely the civil and the religious. Instead of taking citizens to make up the state and so propagate civil religion, Furseth discusses the idea of Hammond that 'religious leaders are organisational vehicles of civil religion' (Furseth 1994, 51). This especially refers to the ways in which people participate in organised Christian activities without necessarily believing in a god. This is certainly fitting with the Scandinavian view of the 'life-cycle church' as described in chapter one. However, the idea that religious institutions are conductors of civil religion is somewhat contested by, for example, Finnish sociologist Susan Sundback (1984). Since Bellah determined civil religion in America to be detached from religious institutions, Sundback has argued that civil religion cannot

exist in the Nordic countries due to the preferential treatment enjoyed by the Lutheran Christian church. They argue that any traits that might be labelled civil religion in the Nordic countries is actually sustained by the state churches. However, this argument takes several aspects for granted. Firstly, it assumes that the state in America truly avoids preference for any one religion. In her book on religious freedom, Winnifred Sullivan showed that religion is often defined according to Protestant thinking, meaning that, at least in the legal system, it does maintain preference for this strain of Christianity (Sullivan 2005). The second assumption by Sundback is the idea, that civil religion is only maintained by the churches in the Nordic countries. As already described by Reeh, this is likely not the case, although this does not mean that the churches do not play a role. Thus, I concede with Reeh that while religious practises in Denmark may be maintained by the national church and therefore could be tucked under the label of institutional religion, it is more appropriate to categorise religious instances in Denmark as civil religious, due to the minor part played by the church in most Dane's everyday lives.

Another scholar who believes civil religion accurately captures the reality in Scandinavia, but that the original concept must be modified, is the Swedish sociologist Erika Willander (2018). Though not specifically stating that the concept will be adapted to Scandinavian parameters, her article is based on Swedish history as well as surveys conducted in Sweden. Willander points out that in the Swedish context it is entirely possible and even the norm to be part of a religious organisation without believing in that religious organ. This view is supported by Stanley, who previously suggested that 'belonging without believing' was a more accurate way to describe the Scandinavian countries in the 20th century (2018, 103-104). This is the opposite of Grace Davie's observation of 'believing without belonging' in the UK during the 20th century, though Davie has admitted that Scandinavia presents an issue for her thesis (2000, 17). In fact, in a note she commented that what Scandinavians 'believe' in is actually 'belonging' and that 'they find their identity in membership' (Ibid.). Unfortunately, she did not explain why Scandinavians apparently do this in a different way from other regions. Willander similarly points out how Sweden does not fit Davie's thesis as many make use of low church attendance as proof of weak religiosity and therefore secularisation. She explains how this is usually seen as passive belief which tends to fall between the categories of religious and non-religious (2018, 54). A consequence of this, she explains, is that this group, which essentially falls between religious and non-religious, is often neglected in research. This point of view certainly explains the significant lack of research on nonfirmations in Denmark. Willander describes the wish of belonging to a church while not attending services as a purposeful way of navigating religious and secular interests (2018,

70). This likely differs from those who participate in nonconfirmation, as some of them actively deny their membership of the church via their nonconfirmation. However, it could still be that for other rites of passage, nonfirmants might not avoid affiliations with the church. Nevertheless, the notion that there is a grey area between religious or non-religious, which can best be observed using civil religion is of great significance for this research on nonconfirmation. Using the concept of civil religion as proposed by Willander, Reeh, and Warburg, can aid in picking out features of the nonconfirmation celebration that have underlying religious connotations.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how civil religion as a concept was first proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and later developed by Robert Bellah in an American context. Scandinavian scholars disagree to what extent civil religion can be applied to accurately capture the reality in Scandinavia as the state-church relationship is astonishingly different from the one in America. Furseth and Sundback maintain that because the churches in Scandinavia are such key players, any traces of civil religion are propagated by the religious institutions. Since civil religion per Bellah is unaffiliated to religious institutions, Sundback argues that civil religion does not occur in Scandinavia. Reeh and Willander, to the contrary, argue that civil religion is the most appropriate concept to describe the role citizens play in maintaining Danish national myths as well as the passive belief observed in Scandinavia. Passive believers tend to fall in between the categories of believers and non-believers and are therefore regularly neglected in research. Willander asserts that this passive belief can best be examined using civil religion.

Though a small sidenote, Davie's concession that her thesis of 'believing without belonging' does not apply to the Scandinavian context and that Scandinavians 'believe in belonging' is quite substantial. It ties in with the previous chapter's investigation of inclusion as a reason for performing secular rituals and helps us understand, why Danish teens find it important to host a nonconfirmation celebration, especially since they have not participated in a ceremony like those who do a confirmation.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes how the data for this research was collected, handled and analysed. As the goal of this research is to understand why Danish teens choose a nonfirmation instead of foregoing a celebration, a qualitative approach had my preference. This would allow participants to provide their own reasons for their choices. However, due to the minimal research on nonfirmation, I included quantitative research as well, such that an explanatory sequential mixed method was followed. This was done by first gathering responses via an online survey about who chooses a nonfirmation and how they conceptualised their decision in their narrative. This already provided an initial idea of what aspects of the celebration, the nonfirmands chose to emphasise. Responses to the survey were then used for developing the questions for the subsequent interviews, the qualitative aspect of the research.

In addition, the survey provided a useful platform for inviting participants for the one-on-one interview. This is further supported by the fact that, unlike a confirmation, there are no preparatory classes or church services that need to be attended prior to the nonfirmation. Hence, there is not a single specific time that can be determined as the time when someone chooses to host a nonfirmation. This, as well as the time constraint placed on this research, largely excludes participant observation as a research method. While participant observation would provide insight into the actual celebration, the decorations used and the procedures followed during each nonfirmation, it would say little of why those things were chosen anyways, without an extended conversation with the nonfirmand themselves. Because of this, I decided to conduct online interviews to gain an understanding of the thought process of the nonfirmands leading up to the nonfirmation and how they ascribed meaning to the event now, when looking back.

Online Surveys

As mentioned in the introduction, an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach was chosen for this study. The first method that was used was an online survey which provided a way to gather information about the demographic of the nonfirmands and to determine which aspects of their celebration they emphasised. In terms of background information, it was of importance to establish whether the nonfirmands had been baptised or not, whether their parents were confirmed and how

they felt religion had been involved in their upbringing. Research has shown that people who were not baptised were less likely to baptise their own children and that those who had not been baptised were less likely to get confirmed (Leth-Nissen and Trolle 2015; Kasselstrand et al. 2018, 98). Furthermore, online surveys were chosen as a way to reach as many people as possible, who have been nonfirm. Since nonfirmants are not generally in an association or as common as confirmants, it was difficult to know how and where to find participants. Therefore, it was chosen to conduct the survey online. In addition, by using online surveys, more data could be generated in a shorter amount of time than with interviews, the second research method chosen for this investigation. The survey was both interpretive and positivist (Hennink et al. 2020, 48) as the questions posed were both open-ended and closed-ended. Examples of these are ‘Are your parents confirmed?’ and ‘What do you believe is different in a nonconfirmation, relative to a confirmation?’, respectively.

The questions for the survey were formulated based on both the researcher’s own experiences of having attended con- and nonfirmations, having lived in Denmark for several years as well as on the survey questions published in Kasselstrand et al.’s article on nonfirmants in Denmark (2018, 92-95). The questions in this article provided a good basis, as they discuss trends between a person’s upbringings and their choice to get nonfirm instead of confirmed. The survey itself consisted in total of 18 questions of which 5 were close-ended questions, 5 short answer questions and finally 8 long answer questions. I chose this mixture to ensure that all questions would be answered, which becomes more unlikely with too many long-answer questions, while still gathering data that was written by the respondent (Meitinger, Braun & Behr 2018, 104). Multiple-choice questions were kept to a minimum as these tend to contain assumptions of the researcher. Before starting any questions, an information sheet was included that informed the participants of who I am, the topic of my research, the fact that all answers provided are anonymous and finally, how to contact me if they had any questions.

The survey began with a number of close-ended questions, which were largely based on Kasselstrand et al.’s questions, such as whether a person’s parents were confirmed, whether they believed or had believed in God, or whether they attended church often while growing up. Additionally, I asked to what extent religion had been discussed growing up, either at school or at home. In some cases, these had yes/no choice answers and in some, the participants were asked to write out a short answer themselves. Hence, the survey began with the easiest questions, after which the middle section of the survey consisted almost exclusively of open-ended questions, which allowed respondents to provide long answers. These questions were predominantly based on the researcher’s own experience with

having hosted a confirmation, as well as having attended a number of con- and nonfirmations while growing up in Denmark. The questions were used to gain insight into what thoughts or preparation the participants had done leading up to their nonfirmation, what their parents' opinions were on their child choosing a nonfirmation over a confirmation, and whether they joined their classmates in the celebratory *Blå Mandag* excursion following the weekend of con- and nonfirmations.

The final section of the survey consisted of easy short answer questions about the participants themselves. These then served as some low effort questions to end with as well as to gather the demographics of the respondents. After this, participants were asked if they would want to also be interviewed, so that I could gain more nuanced and in-depth answers about their nonfirmation. By using the survey to also gather interview participants, it is possible that some nuance is lost as all interview participants also answered the survey as opposed to gathering data from a larger pool. However, it also provided me with a basis for what to ask them as they had answered certain questions differently from other respondents. A final comments box was added in case anyone had additional comments that they felt had not been covered by the question. After this, the final page showed a reminder that all provided data is anonymous and reminded them of my email address, so people could get in touch with me, if they wanted.

Prior to releasing the survey, two students at the University of Southern Denmark reviewed it. None of them had done a nonfirmation, but they were able to point out questions which were too vague as well as questions that would likely be skipped because they seemed too long or required too long of an explanation. The survey was then posted on social media pages such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr.com with the question 'Were you nonfirmed before 2018?' as well as asking people to share the post. The survey was active for a period of 6 weeks, between March 30th and May 4th, 2022.

In the time that the survey was active, a total of 9 completed surveys were collected. It should be noted that another 26 people began the survey, but never finished it. This is likely due to the large number of open-ended questions, asking participants to write a longer response, which is known to put off many people from responding (Nicolaas et al. 2015; Meitinger, Braun & Behr 2018). This particular issue was taken into account prior to releasing the survey, but due to the nature of the topic, I believed that receiving fewer but more in-depth responses outweighed receiving more responses but asking potentially leading yes/no questions. Furthermore, while this may seem like a rather low number of collected surveys, due to the time constraint placed on this thesis, the research was not meant to capture a representative sample of nonfirmation in Denmark. Instead, the surveys were used

in an explanatory approach. Responses from this method, provided insight into what to focus on in the interviews and it allowed for any unexpected answers to be addressed during the interviews (Hennink et al. 2020, 90).

As mentioned earlier, the research specifically called for those who had gotten nonfirmed *before* 2018 while no upper age limit was set. While the common age of confirmation and nonconfirmation is 13-15 years old, I specifically targeted participants who had been nonfirmed 5 or more years prior to completing the survey. This was done to ensure that most participants were of an age where they have developed their reflective skills such that I could ask questions, which needed them to reflect on an event that took place several years ago. Naturally, this meant that some details of the day itself were not remembered so clearly, but I believe a lot of information and value can be gained from how someone explains and interprets their choices with the benefit of hindsight.

Online Semi-structured Interviews

Once the survey had been online for several weeks, the preliminary results were used to formulate interview questions such that semi-structured interviews could be carried out. This interview style was chosen as it allows for open-ended questions as well as flexibility with regards to the order of questions (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2020, 197; Wengraf 2001). Based on the survey responses and a general knowledge of the confirmation and nonconfirmation process, an interview guide was prepared, which contained questions useful for answering the sub questions of this research. Similar to the survey, the interview questions were categorised into questions concerning the time leading up to the nonconfirmation and the day of the nonconfirmation. The questions focused on how the interviewee experienced their choice of a nonconfirmation at the time, while most of their classmates were getting confirmed. The questions themselves mainly consisted of asking participants to describe and interpret their choices. These are questions which would likely have been avoided in a survey or just not given very long answers. Questions which yielded unclear answers in the survey were also included. As an example, one of the survey questions asked participants to describe how they prepared for the nonconfirmation. This mostly yielded the answer that participants did not prepare for the celebration, however, I was also interested in their thoughts about the fact that they would host a nonconfirmation, while many of their classmates were getting confirmed. This was one of the questions which was much easier to ask during an interview than in a survey.

The interviewees were gathered by way of mixed method recruitment (Hennink et al. 2020, 184). Those who had entered their email address at the end of the survey were asked whether they would still like to participate in a follow-up interview. Of these, three people responded that they would be happy to be interviewed, while the rest did not respond. All three prospective interviewees were male, ethnically Danish, between the ages of 21 and 27 and had spent their entire upbringing in Denmark. Two of them had grown up on Jutland, while the third person grew up in the North of Zealand. Due to both the low number of interviewees and the large distances between where they lived, interviews were conducted online via Google meet. Care was taken to create a safe and comfortable environment despite the online format. Additionally, it was ensured that any distractions such as background noise were minimised (Salmons 2015) and I, the interviewer, was seated in a standard office with minimal decoration.

Although this involves not only physical distance, talking through a screen creates some additional emotional distance as well, making it less likely for the interviewee to speak as freely as they would during a face-to-face meeting. This was taken into account and thus, I had taken care to ensure there was good lighting and that the microphone of the laptop functioned well. I also made sure to be extra expressive with my facial features and hands as those were the only parts of my body language that could be seen on camera (Ibid.). After having asked for consent, the interviews were audio-recorded on my phone so as to avoid a screen recording via google meet as this may have meant that the interviewees would prefer to turn off their webcams. This also allowed me to be as present as possible during the interviews, as I did not need to take notes while speaking or listening.

The majority of the questions were prepared beforehand, but during all the interviews the participant was left to speak and describe largely without interruptions. Due to this, some new questions were added during the course of the interview based on what the participant described. The interview guide also served as a good bearing point when the conversation went too far off-topic. As a final question, I choose to outline the hypothesis of this thesis. It had not been my intention to put this forth initially but as during both interviews time was left over and it would be the final question as opposed to one of the first ones, I did not believe it to be an issue. Had the question been posed in the beginning it may have influenced the interview participants when responding to any subsequent questions. Furthermore, I choose to explain the hypothesis as I believed it would be interesting to know whether the interviewees could actually identify with it or not.

To end the interviews on a positive note, a low effort, feel-good question was added about whether the interviewee had any summer plans they were looking forward to. After this, the interviewees were thanked for their participation and once again reminded that their answers were anonymous and should they wish to withdraw their responses, that would be possible at any moment. After concluding the interviews, the recordings were named in a way that the interviewee could not be identified and saved in various places. They were then transcribed using the online transcription app called Trint, which allows for free transcription of audio files.

Discussion of the Results

The interviews were analysed using narrative analysis (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2020) where the focus was on finding overarching themes and trends across the three interviews. These themes were elucidated by coding for words or phrases that made references to ideas of being, traditions, values and inclusion. When analysing the survey responses and interviews, two trends stood out in the way that participants created narratives for their nonconfirmation. Due to this, I will present and discuss the findings in two separate chapters such that each topic can be situated in the broader context. The first of the trends is legitimisation of people's non-religious identity. In the same way that confirmands use the confirmation as a way to legitimise their parent's decision to baptise them, the responses suggest that some nonfirmands similarly reaffirm their parent's decision to *not* baptise them. In chapter 5, I discuss how this helps us understand why many teens do not feel it is enough to choose to not get confirmed but wish publicly state their decision not adhering to the Christian faith.

In chapter 6, the second trend is discussed, which situates nonconfirmation in the context of inclusion behaviour in Denmark. This considers the limits of the hypothesis that this research is founded on - namely that nonconfirmation is chosen as a way to go through a similar rite of passage ritual as classmates who get confirmed. Here considerations are made regarding whether the nonfirmands took part in Blue Monday, the day after the confirmations where the class goes on a trip, usually to Tivoli or go-cart racing or a similar excursion. Furthermore, interview participants were asked what their views were regarding my hypothesis and if they felt that was accurate for them.

Legitimisation of Nonfirmands' Beliefs and Actions

Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, two main themes were identified when analysing the survey responses and interview transcriptions. This chapter will focus on the first main theme. It explores how nonfirmands use their nonconfirmation celebration to legitimise and (re)affirm their nonreligious identity. Research has already shown that the main reason teens chose a nonconfirmation over confirmation is that they do not believe in God (Kasselstrand et al. 2018). But why teens chose to host a nonconfirmation as opposed to only opting out of the confirmation has not been investigated until this point. It has also not been considered how nonfirmands use the nonconfirmation even to consider their (non-)religious identity later in life. The present investigation has examined exactly those questions by using survey responses and interviews. These revealed that most of the participants in some way describe their nonconfirmation and the procedures surrounding it as a way to legitimise their non-religious identity. Strikingly, this trend is seen both for those who came from a Danish Christian family (i.e. passive believers) and those who came from non-religious households. For those from Christian families, the nonconfirmation is used to affirm a decision different from the family's custom, and thereby also the broader 'Danish norm'. In the cases where the nonfirmand came from a non-religious household, the nonconfirmation celebration is used as a confirmation of the parent's choice of not baptising their children. These findings are inferred by how the participants viewed the preparatory confirmation class, the nonconfirmation itself and how they related their religious or non-religious background to their decision.

The Duality of *Konfirmationsforberedelse* or Not

Leading up to the confirmation, it is mandatory for confirmands to partake in a preparatory class called *konfirmationsforberedelse*, where teens are taught about Christianity, speak with the priest and consider life's big questions. According to the official website of the *Folkekirke*, the *konfirmationsforberedelse* will help teens understand the Danish culture and their (Danish) roots (*Folkekirken*, n.d.). During the *konfirmationsforberedelse*, it is expected that students will develop their identities in relation to their beliefs and God. However, this can be equally true for those students who decide to get nonfirmed. One of the survey respondents, named Emil, described how in hindsight, he would have liked to attend the *konfirmationsforberedelse*. He elaborated that he 'believe it should

be mandatory to attend [the class] in order to make a proper choice and not get two hours off from school (as that can negatively impact the decision)'.¹ This comment led me to asking the interviewees whether they agreed that the class could be useful for deciding between the confirmation and a nonconfirmation. The three nonfirmants that I interviewed had all gotten to sleep in while the rest of their classmates had to attend the preparatory class. The first of the interviewees was Mads, who grew up in South Jutland, where he attended the local middle school.² He described himself as coming from a typical Danish family, where both parents are confirmed, and his father is a member of *Folkekirken* 'but not actively'. By this, he meant that his father does not attend church except for occasions such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, or funerals. In his class, there was only one other person to choose a nonconfirmation instead of a confirmation. When asked about mandatory *konfirmationsforberedelse*, Mads revealed that a nonfirmed acquaintance of his had chosen to attend the class 'to get a better understanding of what she was saying "no" to.' Mads himself did not feel that he had missed out on anything by not attending the class.

The second interviewee Oscar, similarly, did not believe that attending the *konfirmationsforberedelse* would have helped him with his decision. Oscar grew up in northern Zealand and of his middle school class, approximately half got confirmed and the other half did not. When asked whether the preparatory class would have helped him in any way, he answered that he saw no point in this. He explained that the class only seemed useful if one is religious and still needs to decide if they want to get confirmed. Hence, the class would be pointless to someone who already knows they are not religious and were certain that they did not want to get confirmed. Furthermore, Oscar believed an upbringing in Denmark provided most people with more than enough insight into Christianity to have a solid foundation for making the decision between a confirmation and a nonconfirmation. For him, the choice of not getting confirmed seemed like something that had developed throughout their whole life. Finally, he explained that there had most likely been a parent to influence the decision one way or another, 'so there is no reason to take a stance [on the choice of confirmation] so late in life. That has probably been done the whole way until that point'. One could argue that it is a sign of civil religion, that Christianity is so pervasive in Danish culture that there is no need to have additional conversations on what it means to perform a confirmation. This is further exemplified by another comment by Oscar, namely that he found it odd that Danish middle schools provide additional free time for students to attend the *konfirmationsforberedelse*. Specifically, he found it strange 'when

¹ All quotes are translated from Danish by me

² All names are pseudonyms

considering that there is a separation between church and state in Denmark'. When I told him Denmark is actually one of the few western European countries with no church-state separation, he corrected that he meant in the popular understanding in Danish society. This again shows how the Danish church is not seen as a purely religious institution, but more as a civil governmental institution that cooperates with state schools. This cooperation is likely to further prompt teens to get confirmed as this is the path that has already been laid out by the Danish norms.

The belief by Oscar that it is late to decide between a confirmation or not at this age is particularly interesting, as many believe that 13–14-year-olds are not mature enough to reflect on whether they believe in God or not when they receive gifts and a party if they say yes (Tulinius 2018; Grønlykke 2017). This is in consideration with the fact that getting confirmed usually includes a party, expensive gifts and money, all things that are likely to affect whether a person chooses to get confirmed. As explained in the introductory chapter, the age is so low because historically, it was legally required to get confirmed in order to hold a job. Later, the reason for keeping the age at 13-14 was that it became mandatory to attend middle school until the 7th grade. This year would then be finished with a confirmation. Thus, on the one hand, many see it as too young an age for getting confirmed. On the other hand, the age has been established by traditions and as such are rarely questioned. Additionally, there is some reluctance to bring up the age debate, as it is believed that fewer people would get confirmed if they were older. Nevertheless, according to Oscar, the timing is more than appropriate and should be a point when teens know if they believe in God or not. In that way, not attending the class became another way for Oscar to affirm his non-religious identity, as attending the class would suggest that he might be religious or in doubt about whether he was religious.

It should also be mentioned that Emil, who wished he had followed the *konfirmationsforberedelse*, still chose to do a nonconfirmation, even without the desired extra information of what he was opting out of. Emil was the only one in his school year to host a nonconfirmation celebration. He added that he grew up in small town in Central Jutland in a class with only ethnically Danish students, which he believed matter for whether someone got confirmed or not. While both his parents are confirmed, he described his family as very non-religious, and his older sister had also hosted a nonconfirmation celebration. When asked about why he felt the *konfirmationsforberedelse* should be mandatory, Emil described that he would have liked having a better basis for knowing what he was deciding. He also explained that he did not believe it would have caused him to get confirmed instead. In addition, he believed the class could have provided a further understanding of Danish culture, similar to what is advertised by the *Folkekirke* on their website.⁴ The sentiment that following a Christianity class would help understand

Danishness was echoed by Mads, who explained that while he did not think his classmates were in any way religious, ‘they had some values attached to being Danish that they did not want to let go of [by not getting confirmed].’ This can be linked to the classification of *kulturkristne* (cultural Christians), as the Danes will often use to describe themselves (Jensen 2021). With this, there is an implied attachment to Christianity without necessarily actively practising Christianity, which is likely what Mads was referring to. This is also captured by the concept of ‘belonging without believing’ (Kasselstrand et al. 2015; Tromp, Press, and Houtman 2020) which explains that while the church attendance and belief is minimal in Denmark (Zuckerman 2009), membership of the *Folkekirke* is very high.

The important thing to note here is that while the interviewees gave two seemingly opposite views on the role of *konfirmationsforberedelse*, both views served to support their identity as someone who does not believe in God. For Emil, attending the preparatory class would perhaps have provided more confidence in his choice to opt out of getting confirmed. For Oscar, not attending the class provided additional proof for his non-religious identity, which would have been threatened if he had attended the class.

What Makes a Choice ‘Real’?

The comment of Emil implying that *konfirmationsforberedelse* is necessary to make a ‘real’ choice regarding confirmation is quite informative. It reflects two lines of thinking: a) those who chose a confirmation have not properly considered the choice, but are just going through with it due to, for example, tradition or family pressure, and b) those who chose a nonconfirmation by contrast have made a more ‘authentic’ decision, as they are choosing something outside the path that is laid out for them by school and society.

The idea that teens largely choose to get confirmed for the sake of the celebration and gifts is something that appeared in several survey responses. Based on several such responses, it appears as if that makes the choice for confirmation less legitimate according to the nonfirmands. For example, when asked why they believe teens get confirmed, one responded that ‘... everyone else does [it] and for the gifts. Not many choose to be confirmed because of faith’. Particularly, the latter comment that most get confirmed for reasons other than their faith implies that confirmands are not being genuine with their decision. Questions of authenticity of faith are not uncommon both from those who

consider themselves religious as well as those who consider themselves non-religious. These sentiments are clear in the way religious terrorists view ordinary Christianity as watered-down versions of the authentic, real faith (Nepstad 2004; Juergensmeyer 2017). Similarly, religious institutions distance themselves from the acts of religious fundamentalists on the basis that they are practising religion incorrectly (Juergensmeyer 2017, 271). Furthermore, it is often those choosing differently from how they were raised that are more concerned with the authenticity and genuineness of their decision. This is clearly observed with apostates (those who have left their [institutional] religion) and religious converts (Amer 2020; Casey 2022; Sealy 2021). Simon Cottee describes how many apostates pride themselves on being contrarian and not conforming to how they were raised (2015, 145). They have made a decision in line with their principles and beliefs, despite the potential consequences of being shunned by the families and community, and therefore feel that they are being more genuine in their non-religious identity. For religious converts, authenticity of their religious identity is central as this is often questioned by their new community and so, there is often a feeling of needing to prove their genuine belief (Casey 2022; Amer 2020). For example, Moosavi found that ‘Muslim converts respond to the suspicion about their authenticity by performing as authentic Muslims and displaying their Muslimness’ (2012, 126). In general, then, the fact that a choice outside of the norm is made can lead to heightened awareness of authenticity of this decision.

In the context of secular or alternative rituals, the concern and emphasis on authenticity has been discussed by Kasselstrand and Rejkowska (2018b; 2020). They both determined that for many of their interlocutors, it felt more genuine and authentic to have a humanist wedding that allowed them to host a celebration without compromising their principles. This view was discussed during the interview with Oscar. However, he did not feel a compromise with principles had been a very conscious reason for his nonconfirmation nor did he believe that teenagers had so much conviction when it came to con- or nonconfirmations. While this may not have been the case for him, Kasselstrand found that 57% of their participants chose a nonconfirmation instead of a confirmation because ‘[they] didn’t want to pretend to believe in something that [they] actually don’t believe in’ (2018a).

The issue of authenticity of choice was addressed by a respondent, who mentioned that they hoped it would be normalised for parents to host a celebration regardless of their child’s decision. They believed that this would narrow the decision to believing or not, as opposed to between a fun day and party or not. This would, according to the respondent, also make the decision of confirmation or nonconfirmation more ‘authentic’, as the benefits are achieved with either choice. This sentiment is further backed up by another respondent who stated that luckily their parents did not want their child

to get confirmed only for the sake of the gifts and the money, ‘which would have been the case [if they had not been okay with their child getting nonfirmmed]’. This is quite interesting, because it suggests that, similar to some other nonfirmands, the respondent perceived a nonfirmation as the more authentic option. However, this respondent would also have chosen to get confirmed if the only options were a confirmation or no party and gifts.

On the one hand, the question of whether teens get confirmed only for the sake of gifts is a sensitive issue in Denmark as most believe this to be true (Ambrosius and Jeppesen 2022). One could argue that this perspective further legitimises nonfirmands in their non-religious identity as they ‘make the genuine decision’. On the other hand, King (2017) reminds us what many forget: namely that religion is lived and practised in different ways and to determine what is religious for someone else does not lie within an outsider’s authority. When looking from the perspective of Protestantism, it is generally believed that material enactment of religion is less important than the relationship with God. However, when looking through the frame of civil religion, gift giving and a party are intricate parts of the rite of passage ritual of confirmation. Because of this, nonfirmands are able to partake in this aspect of Danish civil religion, by hosting a similar celebration party. Thus, the nonfirmands manage to achieve a feeling of moral superiority as they make an ‘authentic choice’ in line with their beliefs, something they believe their confirmand counterparts to be compromising on. Furthermore, they manage to do so while still participating in what could be called Danish civil religion and so, within the expected social norms.

Nonfirmation as Confirmation of Parents’ choice

‘And, in a way, [my nonfirmation was] also [a] confirmation of my parents’ choice not to baptise me.’

Survey response, Emil.

Outside of the fact that most nonfirmands viewed their decision as more authentic relative to that of their peers who got confirmed, several linked it to their parents’ decision not to baptise them. For them, the purpose of their nonfirmation was the same as it is for the confirmands, namely, to confirm the decision made by their parents or guardians. This is illustrated by the fact that 6 of the 9 survey respondents believed the main difference between confirmation and nonfirmation to be that the nonfirmation is a civil confirmation. This means that for them the aspect of confirming remained, while the religious aspect was removed from the process. Hence, by hosting a nonfirmation

celebration, those respondents were able to reaffirm the non-religious identity that they had been brought up with.

Naturally, only respondents who had not been baptised could interpret and give meaning to their nonconfirmation in this way. Akin to this, findings put forth by Kasselstrand et al. (2018a) showed those coming from non-religious households were more likely to host a nonconfirmation than a confirmation. In this study, most of the respondents (6) had not been baptised, while the rest (3) had been baptised. Furthermore, every participant had at least one confirmed parent and in 4 cases, both parents were confirmed. Since the confirmation occurs at such a young age, it could be that some of those parents re-examined their religious affiliations later in life. I say this because every survey respondent stated that they did not and had not previously believed in God, suggesting that their parents did not raise them to be particularly religious. This fits with the findings by Tromp, Press, and Houtman (2020), Rånes (2020), and Zuckerman (2009), that most Danes are culturally Christian, meaning that they go to church only for special occasions and not on a consistent basis for regular services. Special occasions here include Christmas, baptisms, confirmation, weddings and funerals. Additionally, middle schools will sometimes take the class to a church service, especially at the last school day before the summer break. Thus, most would attend church no more than 3 times in an average year. Similarly, the survey participants reported only attending church for the abovementioned occasions, and two cases mentioned attending Christmas services with their middle school classes. These aspects all suggest that the participants in the study generally had a non-religious background, which they appeared to relate the nonconfirmation event too, in the way of reaffirming and legitimising themselves as non-religious Danes.

A final interesting nuance is that this affirmation seemed more prevalent among those from non-religious backgrounds relative to those with slightly more religious upbringings. During the interviews, it was the interviewee who had not been baptised who emphasised that the nonconfirmation was a confirmation of their non-belief and their parent's choice not to baptise them. Prior to this investigation, I would have hypothesised that the opposite would be true. Specifically, I would have speculated that those with a more religious background would utilise the nonconfirmation to establish and legitimise their non-religious identity and break with their upbringing. However, the case here is that those from an irreligious background used the nonconfirmation more intentionally to reflect and use it to reaffirm their identity. It should be noted that the sample pool is rather small so these results should not be generalised and indeed, were the sample pool larger, different results may be found. Nevertheless, this study sheds light on an unexpected reason to host the nonconfirmation celebration.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed one of the main themes that appeared in the investigation into why Danish teens chose to host a nonconfirmation celebration as opposed to only opting out of the confirmation. By still hosting a nonconfirmation, the participants of this study were able to legitimise and (re)affirm their identities as non-religious. This view of themselves as non-religious is built around the fact that many of them had not been baptised, did not attend church other than for mandatory events, and they had not believed in God at any point. Participants ascribed this meaning to the nonconfirmation process in different ways. On the one hand, Emil wished he had attended the *konfirmationsforberedelse* so that he could fully reason why he did not want to get confirmed. On the other hand, not attending the *konfirmationsforberedelse* served the purpose of solidifying Oscar's identity as non-religious by knowing that he was certain of his choice without it.

Participants also questioned the authenticity of the choice of their peers to get confirmed. By contrast, they saw their own decision of getting nonconfirmed as more genuine, because they chose something different from the majority. While the authenticity of the confirmation event is regularly called into question in the Danish public, the nature of the tradition can best be understood from the perspective of civil religion. In this way, the giving of expensive gifts and an elaborate party are an intricate part of the rite of passage ritual. Thus, the nonfirmants are able to feel good about the authenticity of their choice while also participating in Danish civil religion, by hosting a similarly extravagant party.

Finally, the nonfirmants used their celebration to confirm their parent's choice to not baptise them. The data from this sample suggests that those who were not baptised and came from non-religious households used the nonconfirmation intentionally to reaffirm their non-religious identity relative to those who were baptised. Here, being religious is used relatively and mostly refers to the fact that the person was baptised. As described elsewhere, Danes are generally very non-religious already and can best be seen as engaging with civil religion or thought of as culturally Christian.

This chapter leaves several things up for further investigation. Firstly, some participants hoped it would be normalised for parents to host a celebration regardless of their child's choice. It would be of interest whether confirmations would continue to hold significance if this were the case. Secondly, this chapter has discussed ways in which nonfirmants use their nonconfirmation to affirm and lend legitimacy to their non-religious identity. One may wonder why this is meaningful and relevant, in a

highly secularised country like Denmark, where the rite of confirmation is almost more related to Danish norms and values and being Danish than to religion and being religious. I have argued that the main significance is the participation in Danish civil religion, which is achieved by reproducing a secular alternative of the confirmation.

Belonging without Believing

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, one could argue that by hosting a celebration, nonfirmants are able to partake in Danish civil religion. While many question the authenticity of the decision to get confirmed due to the material gains, looking through the framework of Danish civil religion, the gift giving and celebration can be understood as parts of an expected element of Danish upbringing. Hence, by hosting a similar celebration to the confirmation, nonfirmants get to engage with civil religion as well and still be a part of the mainstream society. As humans, such a sense of belonging is highly fundamental to our survival. Feelings of inclusion is the second main theme that was identified during the analysis of the survey responses and interviews and will be the focus of this chapter.

A major aspect of the hypothesis of this investigation is, that we, as people, want to feel included and we want to belong to a group. Specifically, I began this thesis with the question whether there is a relation between teens hosting a nonconfirmation celebration and feelings of Danishness. In Denmark, a very strong emphasis is placed both on '*vi plejer*' ('this is how we [as Danes] usually do things') and that every person be given the same opportunities. Because of this, and due to how frequently confirmations are discussed in the public space, the confirmation event holds the position of cultural rite of passage in Denmark. Furthermore, as described elsewhere, the confirmation and much of its preparation is completed with the whole middle school grade. Hence, by opting out of the confirmation, one is essentially missing out on a class event and openly excluding themselves. A way to overcome this is through hosting a nonconfirmation and, thus, still participating in the rite of passage ritual. In that way, a collective ritual still occurs and intragroup relations are strengthened between the classmates.

This chapter will discuss how nonfirmants involve themselves despite opting out of the traditional ritual. This is done by analysing the opportunities provided by their parents, their views on *Blå Mandag* (the Monday after the confirmation weekend) and how tradition and notions of '*vi plejer*' shapes decision-making in Danish society.

Equal Opportunity and Classmates' Attitude

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the nonfirmants of this study were able to (re)affirm their non-religious identity by opting out of the confirmation and hosting a nonconfirmation celebration. In addition to positioning themselves as non-religious, getting nonfirmed allowed them to participate in Danish civil religion by reproducing aspects of the confirmation such as receiving gifts, hosting a party and giving a speech. This has focused on how the nonfirmants interpret and ascribed meaning to their nonconfirmation when they reflect on the event. Nevertheless, there are additional factors that led these nonfirmants to hosting their nonconfirmation celebration in the first place. When analysing the survey responses and interviews, one such factor that I identified was how opportunity and inclusion was created by the parents and the classmates.

When speaking to Mads, Oscar, and Emil, it was clear that their decision was normalised by the fact that their parents supported them, regardless of whether they wished to host a confirmation or a nonconfirmation. The parents provided the opportunity for their children to choose what they believed as opposed to choosing a confirmation in order to receive gifts and an elaborate party. Furthermore, they ensured that their children would not have to exclude themselves more than necessary from their classmates by opting out of the confirmation. If the parents had only allowed their children a celebration if they got confirmed, their options become limited to getting confirmed, despite not believing, or completely opting out of a significant class event and an initiation ritual into Danish (young) adulthood. Mads provided an example of how inclusivity in the school class is honoured through a conversation with his German partner about children's birthday parties: 'For me as a Dane, it's an assumption or expectation that you invite the whole class or [at least everyone of] the same gender and it wasn't something she was necessarily used to doing, you just chose to invite those you were friends with or knew. So there, again, there is a feeling of inclusion.' This wish to ensure that everyone is included is prevalent in Denmark. Hence, one might expect that parents take this into account when deciding whether to allow their children to host a nonconfirmation, as not extending that option can either lead to exclusion or their child choosing a confirmation despite not wanting to.

This raises the question of what choice the nonfirmants would have made if they knew that their parents would not allow a nonconfirmation. While it remains speculative, the three interviewees seemed confident in their lack of belief in God and appeared okay with choosing an outsider position in their class. However, it is possible that the people who would have chosen differently if given limited opportunities were not reached by this study exactly because they did not host a nonconfirmation. One

survey respondent added that several of their friends would have liked to get nonfirmed but that the parents had not allowed it, so they got confirmed instead. This suggests that not going through the rite of passage in some form, is not recognised as a valid option.

Besides the parents providing the option of freely choosing between confirmation and nonconfirmation, the nonfirmands' classmates similarly contributed to creating a safe setting for them to choose something else. One of the first questions to the three interviewees was what the attitude of their classmates had been towards them choosing to host a nonconfirmation. This was generally very neutral. Even in the classes of Mads and Emil, where they were both the only ones to get nonfirmed, they explained that everyone was okay with their choice. At most, Mads and Oscar had the impression that their peers would have liked to have had the same option. However, Emil's friends seemed to forget that he was choosing something different as soon as he assured them that he would also get to host a party. He explained that 'they didn't care that much about the confirmation, they cared about the party. So, it was more like "Oh, so you won't get a party?". And I was like, "Yes, I still will." Then they were like "ah, alright then"'. One could argue that a reason for this indifference is that Danes engage in 'belonging without believing' as described in the introductory chapter. This is used to explain the fact that while very few Danes regularly attend church, a majority is a member of the *Folkekirke* and it is uncommon for people to self-identify as atheists (Zuckerman 2009, 66). The concept 'belonging without believing' captures well how Danes are able to derive a sense of belonging and connection to a larger group via the national church without seeing themselves as religious (Kasselstrand et al. 2015; Tromp, Press, and Houtman 2020). As described in the previous chapter, by still hosting a nonconfirmation, the nonfirmands are able to be a part of this belonging precisely because the emphasis on authentic belief is so low.

Finally, the nonfirmands created inclusion by interpreting their nonconfirmation in the same terms as the confirmation. By this, it is meant that nonfirmands gave similar reasons for why they got nonfirmed, as commonly used for the confirmation. As described in the introduction, confirmations were originally an initiation from childhood to adulthood in the form of gaining access to new parts of society, such as the ability to hold a job or open a bank account. To this day, there is a strong emphasis on the confirmation being the first adult decision that Danish teenagers make, rather than specifically the confirmation of one's faith. Due to this, getting confirmed is still referred to as *at træde ind i de voksnes rækker* ('to enter the ranks of the adults'). When asked what they felt was celebrated during their nonconfirmation, almost half the survey respondents (4 out of 9) replied that they considered their transition to 'the ranks of the adults' to be the main element. Two participants explained that it was

about making a big decision that ‘truly made it a transition from childhood to adolescence, just like the confirmation’. Emil also emphasised this by explaining that he did not believe there to be a difference between whether you said yes or no to God but that the point is to consider a significant decision. This, once again, emphasises the significance of the confirmation in Danish society and by using the same reason for the nonconfirmation, the youngsters are able to include themselves in, not only a class event, but in a significant Danish initiation ritual from childhood to adolescence. The ritual, be it confirmation or nonconfirmation, marks the belonging to the ingroup, thereby reproducing the boundaries of the national community (Weinberger 2015).

Surprisingly, three of the participants mentioned the celebration of their birthday as the most important aspect of their nonconfirmation. This makes it likely that their parents chose to combine their child’s nonconfirmation with their birthday as the con- and nonconfirmation tends to be a gathering of the extended family, family friends, and neighbours. One respondent added that their nonconfirmation was a good excuse for gathering the part of the family that lived abroad. It may be that some families still feel it is strange to host a party and invite extended family members for making a decision of not getting confirmed. This may be caused by the lack of the ceremonial aspect that is central to the original confirmation. By combining the nonconfirmation with a birthday party, the parents are able to justify and ensure that no one challenges either the decision to get nonconfirmed or to host a celebration to honour that decision.

Blå Mandag

Another aspect where nonfirmands intentionally create inclusion for themselves in the confirmation event and mindset is observed when considering the tradition of *Blå Mandag* (this translates to Blue Monday but it is unrelated to the British phrase). This is a day where the school class goes to a larger city or a theme park, such as Tivoli, where they can spend some of the money they were gifted during their con- or nonconfirmation. *Blå Mandag* always takes place on the Monday after the weekend of the con- and nonconfirmations. It is also common to buy a new outfit for the day, something for which tips and tricks can often be found every year in the youth magazine ‘Vi Unge’ (Søndergaard 2021). Although *Blå Mandag* is not an official holiday or day-off, most schools maintain the tradition of organising a day out for the year that got con- or nonconfirmed. Thus, while *Blå Mandag* is linked to the confirmation event in the sense that it always happens the Monday following the confirmation, there is nothing to prevent anyone else from joining nor is it seen as exclusive for confirmands.

Seeing as this is usually done with the whole school class, it would be interesting to know whether those who choose a nonconfirmation, i.e., something different from the majority, would join or opt out of *Blå Mandag*. Of all the survey respondents, only one answered that they had not joined. Thus, one could suggest that this is another way in which the nonfirmants included themselves in a core aspect of the confirmation process. In addition, the previously mentioned youth magazine *Vi Unge* generally uses language which assumes the confirmation as a given. As an example, they explain about *Blå Mandag* that it takes place ‘after *your* confirmation’ (my emphasis). This is something which would not apply to the nonfirmants but by taking part in *Blå Mandag*, they are still able to join in the celebration of the decision and transition to adolescence that they went through together with their classmates/friends. Similar to the gift giving and hosting a party, *Blå Mandag* can be understood as an aspect of civil religion in the sense that it is part of the rite of passage that made public as it is organised with the school class.

The respondent who had opted out of the *Blå Mandag* excursion was Oscar, one of the interviewees. As described in the previous chapter, Oscar was one of many to host a nonconfirmation in his class. Hence, by not joining the excursion, he did not exclude himself as much as if he had been the only person in the class to get nonfirmed, as in the cases of Mads and Emil. Additionally, he described himself ‘as a rather awkward and asocial teenager, who didn’t start making friends until high school [after moving to a more southern part of the country].’ This likely contributed to not feeling the need to take part in the class excursion on *Blå Mandag* as the highlight, is generally, spending a day out with your close friends. Both Mads and Emil were certain that they would still have joined the *Blå Mandag* even if they had completely opted out of any celebration. To them, not joining just meant a day of sitting at home being bored, so that appeared pointless when they could instead be out enjoying themselves together with their friends.

Similar to how parents created inclusion by allowing their children to get nonfirmed, the nonfirmants were able to include themselves in the rite of passage as best they could by joining the *Blå Mandag* excursion. Despite making a choice different from the majority of Danish teens, nonfirmants are able to mark themselves as part of the in-group (Lamont and Molnár 2002) by joining the collective activity of the *Blå Mandag* excursion. The in-group is here understood as those taking part in the Danish civil religion through the use of the con- and nonconfirmation rituals.

Vi Plejer

There is typically a strong sense of ‘this is how we always do things’ generally encompassed in the phrase ‘*vi plejer*’, meaning ‘we usually [do]’. While this can most likely be constricting for some at times, it is mostly said in a manner that is wholly unquestioning and uncritical as opposed to intentionally suppressing new ideas. Thus, it is more in the way of acceptance and less in the sense that nothing else is possible but that other options have simply never been considered. When asked why their peers got confirmed, both survey respondents and interviewees suggested that it was due to tradition and ‘certain values that we have in Denmark’, as explained by Mads. In general, tradition is a relatively common reason given in Denmark for why confirmations continue to be so prevalent (Kasselstrand et al. 2018), but I was interested in what exactly Mads meant by ‘tradition’. Mads understood tradition here as ‘what we as Danes are used to doing’ because he explained that his impression was that most of his classmates had not been particularly religious. Instead, he thought their reason was that ‘they had certain values that we as Danes have that they wanted to hold on to or in some way feel connected to’. This led to the question of whether Mads then felt as though he had moved away from those ‘Danish values’ by choosing a nonconfirmation. He indeed felt that he had, especially in his view of how things should be done in a family or in society, relative to his parents’ and grandparents’ views. What exactly these Danish values are, was unclear and was not something he could explain very easily. Though Oscar had not given tradition as a reason for teens getting confirmed, I also posed him the question of what people might understand by ‘tradition’ when given as a reason behind the confirmation. We talked back and forth whether tradition was meant in a Danish sense or a family tradition. Here, Oscar was quite firm on it being due to a Danish tradition. He elaborated and said that he also just believed that a lot of people found confirmation a very exciting celebration where many get their first suit or beautiful dress and gifts often in the form of cash or electronics such as laptops or smartphones or even a horse.

This mentality can be linked to how the nonfirmants considered their having a party or joining *Blå Mandag*. The three interviewees seemed surprised by the insinuation that they could have chosen to not host a party or in the cases of Mads and Emil, to not join *Blå Mandag*. Furthermore, because Emil brought up that he wished he had attended the *konfirmationsforberedelse* - the confirmation class, I asked whether he would have preferred to have hosted a humanist confirmation. This is a newer option and was most likely not a possibility at the time when he got nonfirmed. Certainly, it was not commonly known, as the first humanist confirmation that took place in Denmark was held in 2010 in

Zealand (Jensen, n.d.). However, it involves a similar preparatory class to the typical confirmation but without any references to the Bible. While the idea seemed to appeal to Emil, he explained that hosting a humanist confirmation would have been an act too far outside of the norm. This indicates that even though a nonconfirmation is making a different choice compared to the rest, it is still a widely accepted alternative and not something that is generally frowned upon. This is not to say that it is encouraged and it may be that it is frowned upon within individual families but when discussing outsiders, it is generally seen as a valid alternative to the confirmation. Not hosting a party or hosting a humanist confirmation would have been to distance himself too much from his classmates. In terms of ritual process, the humanist confirmation is much more akin the conventional confirmation, so it would be expected to lead to participation in Danish civil religion, in the same way as the nonconfirmation. However, given the discomfort that Emil appeared to feel when considering a humanist confirmation, this does not appear to be the case. Instead, it appears that hosting a humanist confirmation would instead have marked someone outside the symbolic boundary of the in-group (Lamont and Molnár 2002). The discomfort may have arisen a lack of knowledge on what ‘humanism’ entails and in time, humanist confirmation may well be become part of Danish civil religion.

In addition, according to Emil, the confirmation process was so entangled with multiple aspects of the teenagers’ lives at the time, that it would have been too visible if one did not participate in the preparation or was somehow involved with the event. Emil explained that ‘there was so much going on [outside of the main event] that you could not avoid [being involved with] it’. One example that he gave was how the teenagers were tasked with writing their speeches for their confirmation party during a Danish class. It was such a given that everyone would need to write a speech for their celebration, that it was practised and discussed in class. This public and communal nature of the confirmation event is what raises it to the level of civil religion. This is further exemplified by a survey respondent who stated that the confirmation is ‘something that you have to opt out of, not something that you intentionally choose’. This is meant in the sense that more effort must be put into avoiding the confirmation than actually hosting it because it is taken-for-granted in Danish society.

Inclusion through Nonconfirmation

Before revealing the hypothesis of this thesis to the interviewees, I asked them why they believed teens choose to host a nonconfirmation instead of foregoing a celebration. Mads answered that he had chosen a celebration for two reasons. Firstly, there was an excuse for a party and a gathering of the

extended family and friends which his parents offered, and he did not see a reason to declining that. Secondly, the celebration also came in the form of gifts and cash, meaning that again Mads saw no logical reason to decline. Oscar answered that perhaps a small part of it was to not feel excluded. But largely his reasoning was that by hosting a nonconfirmation, he would get all the bonuses of the confirmation, such as a party, cash and cool gifts without the downside of having to attend the *konfirmationsforberedelse* and attending church on a weekly basis during the training period. When asked how he would have felt if he had just foregone the celebration, he explained that he would, of course, have missed out on the huge gathering of his Danish and French family which only happened about once every decade. And he believed that he knew in advance that this was something he would have missed out on.

After gaining insight into why each interviewee had chosen a nonconfirmation instead of foregoing the celebration, I explained the hypothesis of this thesis, i.e., that in order to remain ‘Danish’ and part of having a Danish upbringing, Danish teens choose to host a nonconfirmation rather than omitting a celebration altogether. I explained how I thought that in this way Danish teens refrain from excluding themselves even though they initially do exclude themselves by not getting confirmed. I then asked whether the interviewees could identify themselves with that idea. Oscar did not feel he could identify with the hypothesis. While he described how it may have some truth to it in certain social circles in Denmark, the people in the area where he had attended middle school were generally too materialistic. ‘Maybe we were too young and maybe that’s a subconscious reason, and maybe some would think about it that way now.’ Thus, similar to Mads, he could see the idea of it but thought that at most, this would be an unconscious phenomenon. On the other hand, Oscar had previously suggested that a minor reason for their nonconfirmation was to not feel excluded.

Mads explained that he could certainly see how notions of inclusion play a role in choosing a nonconfirmation over not celebrating. As mentioned previously, he provided the example that during children’s birthdays, it is common in Denmark to invite the whole class or all the classmates of the same gender and not just those that one’s child is friends with. They felt that this was part of a larger ‘*inklusionsfølelse*’ (sense of inclusion or belonging) that is often felt in Denmark, either because it comes naturally or because an intentional effort is put in to include everyone. This sense of inclusion, was emphasised and appealed to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen called for everyone to rely on and use their *samfundssind*. There was an underlying notion that this was a character quality unique to Danes and thus, Denmark could tackle the pandemic better than other countries. While it is difficult to accurately translate *samfundssind* and

all its connotations, Rytter (2023) suggests ‘civic consciousness’ as *samfund* means society and *sind* means mentality or consciousness. I argue that this view the Danes have of themselves as specifically inclusive and herd mentality sustains Danish civil religion and is likely part of why nonfirmations are celebrated.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which civil religion is expressed in Danish society through the event of the confirmation and how nonfirmants employ these to participate in Danish civil religion. As suggested in the previous chapter, even though hosting a nonfirmation is choosing differently from their peers, nonfirmants are able to engage in this civil religion as well by still celebrating their decision. I have argued in this chapter that the fact that nonfirmations are provided as a valid alternative by some parents, suggests a broad focus on inclusion. Furthermore, almost all the nonfirmants participated in the *Blå Mandag* excursion and Mads and Emil were surprised by the suggestion that they could have skipped it. For them it was taken for granted. Given that ‘belonging without believing’ is what characterises Denmark in terms of the people’s relation to the Church, the nonfirmants are able to participate in a similar rite of passage ritual as their peers in order to be included with the majority group, despite choosing differently from the rest.

Concluding Remarks and Future Outlook

The aim of this research has been to gain insight into if and how nonconfirmation, the modified rite of passage ritual, is tied to ideas of being Danish. Research has already shown that those who do not get baptised are less likely to baptise their own children, and the same goes for nonconfirmation (Leth-Nissen and Trolle 2015; Kasselstrand 2018, 98). On the other hand, it is known that humans tend to categorise themselves relative to one another, and Christianity is seen as an identity marker for Danes. This is especially illustrated by the fact that most Danes consider themselves as *'kulturrekristne'* ('culture' Christians) and not as practising believers (Jensen 2021). As a sense of belonging is crucial for us, to opt out to the confirmation ritual would theoretically be to marginalise oneself relative to the majority of Danes.

The focus of this research has then been on those, who not only opt out of the confirmation ritual, but who intentionally and publicly host a nonconfirmation celebration. With this in mind, the following research question was developed: 'Do ties between Danish national identity and the Christian confirmation ritual influence whether teens choose a nonconfirmation celebration as opposed simply not getting confirmed? If so, how do these linkages influence the decision?' To address this question, research was carried out by use of a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach, which consisted of a survey containing closed- and open-ended questions, followed by online interviews. Questions for both were developed based on survey questions of Kasselstrand et al. (2018), as well as personal knowledge from having attended con- and nonconfirmations and having lived in Denmark for several years. The data gathered was analysed by using the conceptual framework of Danish civil religion. Analysis of the survey responses and interviews revealed two main themes, when it came to how nonfirmands ascribed meaning to their nonconfirmations.

The first theme that was found, was that of authenticity of the decision to get nonconfirmed compared to how confirmands elected to get confirmed. The nonfirmands of this study felt that their decision to host a nonconfirmation was more authentic relative to their classmates, as they were genuine in their beliefs. In part, they saw their decision of getting nonconfirmed as more genuine, because they chose something different from the majority. It is not uncommon to hear doubt surrounding the authenticity of the confirmation. Instead, I have argued that the nature of the confirmation tradition can best be understood from the perspective of civil religion. In this way, the giving of expensive gifts and an elaborate party are a crucial part of the rite of passage ritual. Hence, the nonfirmands are able to not

only feel good about their perceived superior authenticity, but they are also engaging in Danish civil religion. In addition to that, those who had not been baptised had a distinct sense of themselves as non-religious, which they were able to reaffirm through their nonconfirmation. Through this, the nonfirmants, who had not been baptised, were also able to consider their nonconfirmation in the same terms as confirmants. Namely, they were confirming their parents' choice of raising them as non-religious. Thus, by still hosting a nonconfirmation, the participants of this study were able to legitimise and (re)affirm their identities as non-religious.

The second theme that was found to influence the choice of hosting a nonconfirmation, was that hosting a nonconfirmation appeared to allow the teens to participate in 'belonging without believing'. Hosting a nonconfirmation celebration, led to the most inclusion in the school class and in the immediate social circle. The latter is understood here, as the extended family members and neighbours of the teenager, who have an expectation that a decision followed by a celebration will occur at the age of 14-15. The aforementioned inclusion was provided or attained via a number of routes i.e., equal opportunity provided by the parents, participation in *Blå Mandag*, and nonconfirmation being seen as a valid alternative for the confirmation. While it is different from the majority choice, it is not too outside of the mainstream as nonconfirmations are by now a relatively common and accepted practise in most parts of Denmark. This meant that a nonconfirmation was less odd than completely opting out of any celebration or than hosting a humanist confirmation. Emil explained that a humanist confirmation would have been too strange, likely because this is not yet seen as a valid alternative to the original confirmation.

While the latter theme was expected to be a reason for the nonconfirmation, this study has shed light on an unexpected reason to host the nonconfirmation celebration, namely the legitimisation and (re)-affirmation of non-religious identities. Nevertheless, one may wonder how meaningful and relevant this is, in a highly secularised country like Denmark, where the rite of confirmation is almost more related to Danish norms and values and being Danish than to religion and being religious. One answer may be, that it is the engagement with civil religion that really provides value, more so than the feeling of authenticity and non-religious identity affirmation. However, this may be something that requires more research. In addition, future research should consider how the landscape of con- and nonconfirmations will change going forwards with the increasing rise of humanist confirmations. Moreover, it should be considered how the rise in humanist confirmations influence the concern with authenticity of the nonfirmants' decision.

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