

# Contemplative Spirituality and Learning Culture in Confirmation Classes in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark

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Tidsskrift for praktisk teologi  
Nordic Journal of Practical Theology  
Årgang 40. Nr. 1/2023  
[s. 52-67]  
<https://doi.org/10.48626/tpt.v40i1.5526>



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## Abstract

This article examines a contemplative exercise in a confirmation class of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Each confirmand is asked to lie down in a pew isolated from the rest of the class and to meditate on prayer and scripture in the dim light of the sanctuary while contemplative music is played. This article raises questions about the learning process and the role of the minister. It focuses on what happens when learning modes shift from addressing what religion, as a system of knowledge, objectively is, to practised religion (how it is done) and to its more subjective form, religion as faith or experience. A problem is rooted in a conflict among these three aspects of religion and the associated modes of learning, which reveals a tension between external objectivity and the internal nature of subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, experiential religion, learning culture, confirmation, Denmark

## 1. Introduction: Experiential religion in confirmation classes

The official guidelines for applying and understanding the Danish Confirmation Act of 2014 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) states that ‘Christianity is not a religion that builds on internal mysticism...’ (Baptismal Learning in the Folk Church, 2010, p. 10). This statement expresses a certain lingering scepticism about ‘internal mysticism’. However, in confirmation classes, ministers introduce confirmands to experiential religion, for example, through bodily exercises where the young people learn to listen to God’s voice in their minds. This appears to be a recent development in practice,<sup>1</sup> and therefore it is important to research the practice itself and the ministers’ theologies, when they reflect on and engage in such practices.

I explore a case of experiential practice and discuss such practices as a religious aspect in contemporary ecclesiastical youth work in Denmark. This case presents an example of an international trend towards spirituality, which makes room for both for believers and unbelievers (Taylor, 2007, p. 5-6). The example I present shows that experiential spirituality as found in the holistic milieu (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) may be transformed and adapted by a mainstream church’s work with youth.

### 1.1 Literature review

There is surprisingly little research on confirmation as a contemporary church practice in Denmark. There are several pastoral handbooks about teaching (Folkekirken Konfirmandcenter) and smaller reports on the subject. Most interesting is Petersen’s 2017 report. She works with the ministers’ roles and a subject she calls ‘Holy Spirit pedagogy’. This term indicates a special relationship between pedagogy and a divine presence, which creates space for spirituality and mysticism.

The Danish scholar turned minister, Leise Christensen, and the sociologist of religion, Henrik Reintoft Christensen, took part in the extensive, quantitative confirmation project directed by Friedrich Schweitzer and Henrik Simojoki, which compared confirmation preparation in seven European countries (2010, 2015, 2017). Their research gathered responses from approximately 20,000 confirmands and provides basic insights into young people’s motivation for confirmation, their attitude to the church, and their answers to certain basic theological questions. Also, their findings include indications of confirmands’ increased appreciation of the spiritual side of confirmation, which supports my interest in a qualitative exploration of how such spiritual elements unfold in practice. Fifty-three per cent of confirmands identified the confirmation blessing the most important motive (Schweitzer et al. 2015, p. 217). Although this quantitative, international project provides extensive insights into confirmation work throughout Europe, and identifies important general trends and

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this is the report of consultant and minister of the diocese of Elsinore, Pernille Nærvig Petersen, concerning Ministers, Confirmands, and Pedagogy (Brugsrapport Helsingør stift, 2017) mentioned in the literature review.

insights, there is still a need for in-depth qualitative research in this field to supplement and refine our knowledge.

Claire Wolteich, professor of Practical Theology and Spiritual Studies in Boston, describes experiential spirituality as comfortably claimed by mainstream churches in the United States (Schneider & Wolteich, 2013, p. 104). In the same article, Jörg Schneider reports from Germany that there has been a development in Protestant theology, which has gone from theology that has a negative attitude to religious experience back to Schleiermacher's thinking (Vermittlungstheologie) with an openness to spirituality (2013).

In other Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden, a movement similar to the abovementioned one seems to have emerged much earlier than it did in Denmark. Morten Holmqvist's dissertation on confirmation (2015) reflects this, and includes an important study of the relationship between spirituality and learning modes, which is consistent with the ideas of the Norwegian professor, Geir Afdal's *Religion i bevegelse* (2013). Holmqvist describes spirituality as a mystical encounter and an experience of awe and wonder. Another important Norwegian work is Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Tone Stangeland Kaufman's study of children's spirituality (2017). Here, spirituality is defined as lived religion: human experience of the relationship with God, religious practice, and an interpretation of reality through Christian tradition.

Jos de Koch and Ronelle Sonnenberg from the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, work with the relationship between religious learning and religious experience as rooted in human bodies (2012). They focus, as I do in this article, on concrete experience acts, and rituals, not cognitive processes. Practice is here a primary way to spirituality as religious experience in youth work.

I apply the understanding of spirituality in the last three studies mentioned above, which is the human experience of the relationship with God, with awe and wonder rooted in physical activity as something that precedes reflection. However, my particular take is on ministers' theologies and how the introduction of spirituality in a specific Danish religious learning setting affects the roles of ministers and confirmands.

Even though there is little research in confirmation work in Denmark, my study may be compared to a number of studies of contemporary church practices in the ELCD (e.g. Rønkilde and Demant, 2020; Johansen and Schmidt, 2022). These studies focus on spirituality and bodily exercises that offer an opportunity for an encounter with God, and reflect both a renewal of church practices and a new understanding of the pastoral office (Demant, 2020, p. 220). The church space is understood to interact with those who are present in it as a congregation, and it has its own particular voice that establishes a mood that depends on its aesthetics and use of light. This opens for sensing a meaning and epistemological perspective (Johansen, 2020, p. 217 with reference to Böhme, Marchner, Jørgensen). An essential trait of this newer Danish research refers to Pietism, namely the connection between faith and experience (Demant, 2020, p. 233).

## 1.2 Aim and research questions

The central theme of this article is spirituality, here understood in terms of experiential religion, learning to listen to the voice of God, as these are introduced by a minister in a Danish religious learning setting, namely, confirmation training. I aim to examine spiritual practices in a concrete setting to supplement the abovementioned quantitative studies with a deeper investigation. The research questions are: *What characterises a minister's theologies as they unfold in the fellowship of confirmation training, when an exercise that aims for religious experience is introduced? How does it affect the minister's role and how do the confirmands respond?* The key research question is first explored by paying attention to the specific learning setting - How does the minister act? How do the confirmands respond? - and second, by analysing the ways in which theologies unfold in this interaction.

This article is part of my research and an ethnographic case-study that observes activities connected with learning spirituality during confirmation training in the ELCD, as expressions of the minister's theologies. Professor Ulla Schmidt explains "how practice and practice theories on the one hand and beliefs, ideas and intentions on the other, are viewed as integrated rather than separate" (2022, p. 12). In this article, 'practice' is understood as performed theologies in which learning and teaching become embedded and integrated. I focus on theologies as they are unfolded in practice by the ministers. The single case strategy was based on data and sampling in order to establish inquiries, interpretation and analysis.

## 1.3 Confirmation in Denmark

Confirmation is still a significant event in Denmark, as roughly 70 per cent of young Danes are confirmed. After the confirmation proper, in filled churches especially adorned for the day, families and friends celebrate with the young people in restaurants or other places large enough to serve 25 to 70 people. There are gifts, songs and special speeches written for the occasion, in honour of the confirmand. Preparation for confirmation takes place over the nine months (September to May) preceding confirmation. It consists of two lessons per week either in the morning or afternoon often during school hours and on church premises. This pattern includes 2 to 3 full days of teaching. Camps are rare.

In Denmark there is still a close relationship between school and church. The school is obligated to allow time for confirmation instruction during school hours. This is stipulated by law, despite the fact that the Danish state school has been non-denominational since 1975. Confirmation training is different from school mode. It takes place at church, when the confirmands are in their seventh or eighth academic year. During this year there is no other religious instruction at school.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> School law §53 cf. § 40, section. 2, no. 4, and § 44, section. 2, no. 1. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2019/823>

### 2. Methodological approach: Ethnography

With respect to methodology, I follow the recent trends of the empirical turn in contemporary theology, and also empirical research as an epistemological path. Therefore, ethnographic case-study is my main approach. Thus, theologies are observed in situ. I chose to do an ethnographic case-study because, beyond its research value as such, there “probably cannot exist a real epistemic theory in social sciences” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 463). Case-study research reveals specific contextual knowledge and supports in-depth insights that may also apply to other situations and settings (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 465). All four ministers who I studied introduced elements of experiential religion in their confirmation classes, and thus they contribute to a pattern revealed by newer Danish research, especially that of the renewal of Danish church practices. A common element identified by Jette Rønkilde is the development of people’s religious horizons, with a closer connection between experience and the religious universe, and to further the experience of God through physical activity (Rønkilde, 2020, p. 262, 265).

For my key case-study I chose that of a physical exercise for introducing experiential religion, led by a minister, Hanne. The confirmands were asked to lie down in the pews to listen to the voice of God. Two other ministers in my study included the same practice as part of a 15-minute devotion at the beginning of each confirmation session, but for Hanne this is something to be done once, and involved an entire session (1.5 hour). For this reason, I chose to focus on Hanne’s case in particular as the longer duration allowed more details and interactions to develop and also for theological interpretations to emerge.

Before I began to do research, I worked with ministers as an educational consultant for three years. Before that, I worked as a minister, teacher and teaching consultant. My educational background is theology and pedagogical philosophy. Thus, I was familiar with this field of study from within. This may be an advantage, but also presents the risk of bias. As a consultant I helped ministers to reach their goals, but as a researcher, I was primarily an observer. I had to remember this distinction, and also to resist the temptation – both as an insider and an outsider - to sympathize with the participants, or condemn what was done because I forgot that the participants acted on the spur of the moment, drawn up in what was happening, and did not have time to reflect or the hindsight that the researcher would have after the fact. It was necessary to be extremely aware of the fact that my primary aim was to provide new knowledge, not to improve practices.

For nine months, I followed four ministers as they met for two hours a week with their confirmands, who came from six classes in three parishes in the same diocese (September–May of 2017–2018 and 2018–2019). The ministers mostly worked alone, without helpers. I was present once a month in each class, and concluded with the confirmation services in all three parishes. I had informal talks with ministers and confirmands, and at the end of the period I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with ministers, and with the confirmands in groups of eight. All observations were transcribed, and I conducted an abductive analysis to code the material, first on

its own terms, letting the material speak for itself, and second, by using codes for various theorists and concepts, such as atmosphere (Böhme) and spirituality.

### 3. Theory: Religious experience in a learning situation

Spirituality is a multifaceted concept that encompasses nearly every religious act or way of thinking, and even has room for the unbeliever and something between believer and unbeliever (Taylor, 2007, p. 5–7). Taylor describes the religious experience of the believer as spectacular and involving a moment when ‘ordinary reality is abolished’ (2007, p. 5–6). In this research on confirmation training, spirituality is not so spectacular, but is understood as experiential religion, including a moment of sensing God, a mystical encounter with the divine, where the voice of God is heard in the confirmands’ own thoughts and lifeworlds.

As I am aware that spirituality is more than experiential religion, I position spirituality within lived religion and limit it to the Christian tradition. Kaufman states that spirituality is ‘the way in which a person experiences the relationship to God, and nurtures and expresses his or her faith with special emphasis of Christian practice’ (Kaufman, 2017, p. 53). Thus, this definition encompasses the acting minister’s theologies and spiritual focus. In this instance, the concept of spirituality references contemplation during a contemplative pew-exercise that involves relaxation and breathing following prayer. In the Christian tradition, contemplation is traditionally understood as beholding God (Kaufman, 2017, p. 61). Both spoken and silent prayer occurred in the case studied, supported by contemplative music and dim light in the sacred space. Contemplation and action were united in a reciprocal relationship (Kaufman, 2017, p. 39).

My understanding of spirituality as religious experience in a learning setting takes as its points of departure the Dutch theologian Charles Hermans’ three aspects of religion (2003, p. 150–151) and Morten Holmqvist’s learning theory concerning confirmation work (2015). The relationship between Hermans and Holmqvist is of special interest, as Holmqvist connects Hermans’ three aspects of religion to his learning theory in the following way.

1. A belief based on a knowledge of God, expressed in language (words, texts, stories). According to Holmqvist, religion is understood as cognitively-oriented objective knowledge, such as a belief system with an emphasis on religious stories and doctrines. This type of knowledge corresponds to the learning mode of acquisition (Sfard, 1998), and Holmqvist’s own term ‘logic of belief’ (Holmqvist, 2015, p. 72–82). It is a defining and normative force.
2. A religious practice that uses religious symbols.  
Religion as practice corresponds to the learning mode of participation (Sfard, 1998), and Holmqvist calls this ‘logic of practice’ (2015, p. 72–82). Practising religion creates opportunities for acquiring practical knowledge and developing a spiritual epistemology, through the enactment of religion, for example, through rituals as paths to experiential religion. It goes beyond the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity (Afdal, 2013, p. 169).

3. A certain type of religious experience. This type of experiential religion is individual and subjective. Holmqvist calls this 'logic of faith' (Holmqvist, 2015, p. 72–82), which evokes awe and wonder.

The case presented in this article exemplifies how experiential religion is introduced in a learning setting by combining physical activity with contemplation, to learn to listen to the voice of God. Therefore, I am inspired primarily by Holmqvist's learning metaphors of the logic of practice and the logic of faith. Yet, I am aware that in all three aspects of religion there will always be a measure of the other types, as they interact. In my case description, the learning metaphor is that of participatory learning, and the learners are the participants (both minister and confirmands).

There may be conflicts and competition among the foregoing religious aspects (Hermans 2003), and I assert that experiential religion was disconnected from the learning setting sometime in the past. Therefore, an object of this study is to observe what happens when it is reintroduced. It seems that one of the consequences is a reversion to inspiration from the Pietistic tradition with focus on feelings and aesthetics (Demant, 2020, p. 232–234). Yet here it instead has a dialectical effect, where the two extreme aspects of religion (logic of belief and logic of faith) qualify each other. Experiential religion is fundamental (Jarvis, 2008, p. 566) as the origin of religion, but it is fragmented, unclear and difficult to communicate (Afdal, 2013, p. 107). It needs objective knowledge for reflection and clarification. Reciprocally, objective knowledge or the logic of belief needs renewal and the modification of petrified doctrines of experiential religion (logic of faith). This movement is both a necessary and a dynamic development that supports renewal and clarification.

Interacting and participatory procedures do not hinder individual insights and contributions, even though spiritual insight is individual and strictly subjective; 'learning processes are framed and decontextualised as existential encounters between the learner and religious phenomena' (Holmqvist, 2015, p. 115). Yet, the participants' various contributions may have common traits that lead to a shared experiential fellowship. In Rothman's words, 'a... sense of transcendence of self, a loss of awareness of physicality and individuality while at the same time a sense of something within self that had an immediate connection to the group' (2009, p. 179). Shared religious experiences are individual contributions to this fellowship. 'To share religious experiences, to have them in fellowship, and talk about them to each other is one of the most effective forms of dialogue and exceeds teaching' (Zeitler, Kristeligt Dagblad, September 21, 2021). Thus, I see and understand learning primarily as a collective and relational phenomenon. In the words of Afdal: 'Learning means that my relationships to others, God and reality are changing. We cannot (only) search for learning inside the individual person, but in relationships, communication, among them' (Afdal 2008 my translation, p. 230).

### *3.1 Spirituality and the aesthetic of a space*

In my work with spirituality, understood as experiential religion, one of my aims is to address how it is introduced to confirmands. In extension of Holmqvist's thoughts

about, or theory of learning that evokes awe and wonder, that is, an emotional experience, I also identify the learning environment as essential. With reference to this, the German philosopher Gernot Böhme is of interest. As mentioned in the literature review, Böhme advocates a theory in which the architecture of the church space and its artefacts, interacting with the worshippers or visitors in the sanctuary, may include an atmosphere that is conducive to spiritual experiences (Böhme 2006, p. 144). In Böhme's hermeneutical phenomenology, both the space and those using the space actively create an atmosphere in which dimmed lights, the sacred space and contemplative music interact.

Erhabenheit und Stille sind allerdings Atmosphären, die getrennt von einander vorkommen können. Das sieht man schon daran, dass die Atmosphäre des Erhabenen in kirchlichen Räumen auch gerade durch Musik, insbesondere Orgelmusik, gesteigert werden. Erhabenheit und Stille gehen aber in kirchlichen Räumen eine innige Verbindung ein, und zwar weil sie das Subjekt in derselben ambivalenten Weise anmuten. (Böhme 2006, p. 144).

For Böhme, the question of doing and learning spirituality is connected to the importance of space and materiality in religion. The connection of this aesthetic perspective with learning spirituality is seen in the case in the next section, where the sacred space, dimmed lights, and contemplative music are combined with silence, to frame the bodily exercise of listening to God.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 *The case*<sup>3</sup>

It is a dark winter morning, and the minister, Hanne, and her 15 confirmands are gathered in the church. Hanne introduces the subject of prayer. She is not an expert, and prayer is not her primary skill. She says that noise may be a disturbing element, and that it is necessary to concentrate and keep one's thoughts free of other matters. After that, she seats the confirmands in the pews, one for each confirmand. Here they are to lie down, so they cannot see each other.

There is music, but otherwise, silence. No one says anything. There is a dim light from the candle and the light stand. The only electric light still on is the one behind the altar, so the wooden cross is clearly visible. Hanne turns off the music, and in a clear but soft voice says, 'I am the light of the world'. After that the music is turned on again.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted direct speech and interviews were translated from Danish by the author. The difference between the languages cannot be entirely overcome, but they are insignificant.

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After a few minutes, Hanne turns off the music, walks over to the confirmands, and gives each of them a little red plastic heart that may be turned on with a click, which causes a liquid inside them to become warm. The confirmands are instructed to say a prayer in their hearts, breathing in and out: 'Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'.

### *4.2 Creating a contemplative space*

Hanne acts as a spiritual practitioner by preparing the setting for the exercise, which is physical. Lying in the pews, the confirmands listen to words from the Bible and recite the prayer to Jesus as they breathe in and out. This is an old, established religious practice for opening the mind to meditation with the mantra-like use of repeated prayer. The plastic heart is to be touched, felt in the hand and looked at, as it becomes warm, soft or hard.

Normally, preparation for confirmation takes place in a neutral classroom on church premises, but on this occasion, Hanne selected the church space for this exercise. This space is an important element for mediating the spiritual experience and creating an atmosphere conducive to contemplation, especially when it is connected to the affective elements of sound (music), dim light and silence. Therefore, she asked the confirmands to be silent as they lay down in their pews, emptying their minds. Böhme speaks of the effect of dim light in a sanctuary: 'Es nimmt die Erwartung, die in der Dämmerung sich bildet, auf, und führt sie nach oben. Diese Erhebung mag Christen eine sinliche Erlösungserfahrung vermitteln' (Böhme, 2006, p. 144).

Böhme regards dim light as a significant aspect of a religious mood. He distinguishes between phenomena in nature, such as a sunset, and phenomena that occur in churches. Light as such has a theological significance. St. Augustine understood it as Christ literally being present, a dominant view in the Middle Ages (Björn and Gotfredsen, 1996, p. 113). Hanne seems to share the idea that dim light, together with music and silence is a part of the spiritual experience within the sanctuary. In other words, various artefacts work together, as Hanne uses and is used by the sanctuary for this spiritual exercise. She said, 'I am in no doubt about the fact that the Holy Spirit was present'. Of the pew exercise, she said that 'there was something like a heavenly seal above them, and they were here in a presence that they wondered about. When do young people experience such a presence?' She felt that the confirmands had changed, and behaved differently than usual. She saw them as being in a state of wondering expectation. Regarding that specific day, she says that it was the 'starry moment' over them all.

### *4.3 A radical change*

An essential finding of this study is that Hanne exchanges her usual roles in the class, as teacher, theological expert and counsellor, for the double role of spiritual instructor and co-practitioner (Demant, 2020, p. 233). Many of the mentioned roles are included in this construction, but this is different from the usual pastoral procedure, as discussed in the Kendal investigation of spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005), where the spiritual instructor is found in a holistic milieu that is different from that of traditional

churches. Hanne adapts her double role somewhat to fit her position as minister, but it is clearly something different in this context, even though it is similar to something previously found in the history of the Danish confirmation, as will be seen. Unlike what is seen in the so-called holistic milieu mentioned by Kendal, Hanne makes no promises about the improvement of the self; she only asks the young people to open the doors of their minds to the spiritual world, expecting that God will be there for them.

What happened during the exercise surprised the confirmands, as it was so different from what usually happened in the class. The routine was broken. The sanctuary with contemplative music and dimmed lights replaced the usual neutral classroom (Johansen, 2020, p. 217 with reference to Böhme). Something new took place, and no doubt the minister had the attention of all the young people when she assumed the new pastoral role of spiritual instructor and co-practitioner.

#### *4.4 Spirituality in the confirmation class*

This case description of an attempt to bring spirituality back into the ELCD's work with confirmands makes certain matters clear. Firstly, there is an answer to the question of how the minister understands spirituality. It is not a spectacular matter, as described by Taylor, 'Something terrifying *Other* shines through' (2007, p. 5–6), nor it is a spiritual 'breakthrough', which was the purpose of the original Danish–Norwegian Confirmation Act of 1736, to give the confirmands 'a spiritual experience... to be brought to a true change of heart and mind' (§4). Hanne's understanding of spirituality seems without the Pietistic focus on one's personal failure as an incentive to conversion. It appears to be purely positive, perhaps with a glimpse of Taylor's fulfilment of life (2007, p. 5) or William James' happy state of mind resulting from true religion (Hermans, 2003, p. 16). It is not a strict requirement to be accepted by the confirmands, but instead, in Marie Vejrup Nielsen's words, 'a friendly, facilitating offer of piety' (2020, p. 210), which is also evident in Hanne's description of her religious experience and discussion of prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Hanne's learning spirituality means listening, to hear the voice of God, 'something immediate, which we do not immediately put into words, but which we nevertheless register' (Hermans, 2003, p. 163 with reference to Kuitert). Still, Hanne wants her confirmands to reflect on and describe their experiences in their own words, situating them in a Christian tradition and context (Kaufman, 2017, p. 53). Secondly, it is evident that Hanne's method involves an exercise that is both individual and personal, but also includes a sense of fellowship. The whole class is together in the church, led to do the same thing in the same way. It appears that even though religious experience is individual, it is not merely subjective, and experiential intersubjectivity may be present and is often shared (Zeitler, 2021). Thirdly, the reason for learning is to have a first-hand experience, to go beyond heteronomous knowledge to reach an autonomous insight into that which precedes religion, is its precondition (Hermans, 2003, p. 151).

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<sup>4</sup> 4.6 The case, part three: reflecting on prayer.

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### *4.5 The case, part two: interpreting the heart*

Once the confirmands have done the contemplative exercise for a little while, they are asked to sit up in the pews. The music is turned off. Hanne asks, 'What did you feel about the heart? Did something happen with the heart?' One boy replies, 'It got f.....<sup>5</sup> warm'.

Hanne: It got warm?

Another boy: I felt dead.

Hanne (wondering): Did you feel dead?... What happens with the heart when it becomes cold?

One boy whispers: It gets hard.

Hanne repeats: Yes, it gets hard.

Hanne explains that our hearts should not be cold or hard like stone (just like the plastic heart). 'We need to keep our hearts moveable and warm', she concludes.

#### 4.5.1 The spiritual instructor at work

There was a break in the class session after the pew exercise, during which the confirmands relaxed and nothing was required of them. Then they were asked to change their bodily position, and the interaction between them and Hanne changed. They were no longer equal co-practitioners. Hanne took the lead as the instructor. She asked questions they had to answer and comment on, and she evaluated their answers. This indicates that the hierarchical difference between Hanne and her confirmands was still there. Thus, the break marked the point at which Hanne left the activity as a spiritual practitioner and became an instructor who wanted to bring the exercise to its conclusion (Demant, 2020, p. 233).

Hanne's silence regarding the eventual outcome of the exercise does not prevent her from asking the confirmands about the plastic heart. Some of the answers to her initial questions indicate resistance to the procedure. 'It got f..... warm' and 'I felt dead' seem to indicate a rejection of the exercise. Hanne does not scold the boy for swearing, as she may think that this is ordinary language for him, and she does not ask any of them for an explanation. Instead, she repeats their answers and asks new questions. Seemingly uninterested in finding out what might lie behind the boys' statements, she goes on with the process. In other words, she treats this as an inconvenient disturbance that needs to be neutralised. The third boy's whispered remark ('It gets hard') does not seem to be a part of this quiet rebellion. Instead, he distances his reply from the preceding answers, to create a positive and serious atmosphere. He takes on the pupil's accepted role and Hanne confirms this.

### *4.6 The case, part three: reflecting on prayer*

In the subsequent exercise, the confirmands are asked to write about prayer and their thoughts during the exercise, then to place what they had written in front of the altar.

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<sup>5</sup> The use of this swear word is less offensive in Danish than it is in English, therefore the minister's reaction is moderate.

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Hanne mentions that some of them may have felt a special presence or prayer in their hearts while lying in the pews. The confirmands place their notes before the altar and gather in a circle. Only one of them does not join the others. He has not written anything. Hanne says to him: 'I hoped that there was someone who did not write anything, so it is fine'. After that, he joins the circle.

Hanne wants to know what they have written. Prayer is individual and may be defined as a conversation with God, but it is also something we can do together. There is no right or wrong prayer. One boy mentions that prayer involves talking with God, relaxing, folding your hands, taking control of yourself. Another boy wrote that prayer means believing that someone greater than yourself is with you. The girls are silent, but after some pressure from Hanne, one girl says that prayer means talking with God. It involves life and faith.

Hanne explains that when she grew up, they did not pray in her home, so it had been difficult for her to pray. She taught herself the Lord's Prayer, and it was a comfort to her. She felt that somebody took her by the hand or touched her heart. She also mentions the idea of free prayer. She is not very good at this, but she still practises it, and there is only one way: 'open your mouth and let your heart talk'.

Hanne: What can you pray to God for? Is there something you cannot ask for?

Boy: You cannot ask God to come down to earth.

Hanne: You can!

Boy: Yes, but it will not happen.

Hanne: It may happen sometimes.

Boy: But it is now, we need it, if we pray for it. Come down to earth, but nothing happens.

Hanne: But then you may be in a situation where you need help, and then suddenly you get it. Afterwards you think: Where did that come from?

She goes on to explain that God may say 'no' to something that is not good for us, but that prayer is not dangerous. It is a tool that helps us to go into ourselves and find strength in that which God tells us. We can hear it only in the silence. Then, the Holy Spirit can whisper in our minds. When someone whispers, you are automatically silent.

Hanne continues: Is there anyone who knows how to practise free prayer, where you just pray for what is in your heart?

No one answers.

Hanne: What about you, John, from the Boys' Brigade?

John: Sometimes...

Hanne: Sometimes?... Can you tell us... Will you tell us how it is to make a free prayer?

John: I just make up something.

Hanne: Yes, and how does it work?

John: (pause) Ehh... (pause)

Hanne: Have you had an experience with God?

John: What I have experienced is that it works with strength.

Hanne: Yes, it works with strength.

### 4.6.1 The aim of the exercise is to hear the divine voice

According to Hanne's explanation, mentioned above ('... prayer... is a tool that helps us... Then the Holy Spirit can whisper in our minds'), she seems to believe that the right conditions in the sanctuary, the exercise, light and music, and prayerful silence will create an atmosphere that opens a channel for the Holy Spirit to become the third participant in the learning session, in addition to her and the confirmands (Nærvig, Holy Spirit pedagogy, 2017). Hanne's understanding and use of the church space seems to be consistent with Kirstine Helboe Johansen's description of the sanctuary as 'an independent voice that creates a mood completely dependent on the church space's aesthetics, materials and lighting [...] The meeting with the space gives birth not only to special sensory impressions, but also creates an opportunity for a form of comprehension of meaning or fullness of meaning' (Johansen, 2020, p. 217, my translation, with reference to Böhme, Jørgensen, and Marschner). This occurs in the interaction between people and their surroundings, but it means that 'it is possible to work materially with the mood created by the church space and its atmosphere. This is true [...] in the more occasional staging of the space for a specific action' (Johansen 2020, p. 217–218).

To Hanne, listening to God means to be taken by the hand and to feel one's heart being touched. She believes that the Holy Spirit will guide the confirmands, but still she wants to make sure that they correctly understand what they receive. Bearing in mind the doctrinal logic of belief, Hanne controls the young people's religious statements (Holmqvist 2015, 72–82). The confirmands are no longer her equal co-practitioners, and she does not dare leave them entirely to their own devices for spiritual guidance.

For Hanne there is no conflict or competition among the three aspects of religion, religion as epistemic knowledge, religion in doing mode and experiential religion. She introduces spirituality as a way of hearing the voice of God, because she seeks to add something to that which the confirmands already know, namely, religion as stories, rules and commandments to be learned, and as something to be expressed through worship, such as prayer and song. From her own experience she knows that there is more to Christianity than epistemic knowledge and certain acts. For the confirmands, experiential religion is not just to be an upgrade or renewal of their knowledge that brings it into a new, joyful perspective, but it also works both ways: what they already know may clarify and help them to identify religious experience.

### 4.6.2 Handling resistance

As noted previously, there seemed to be some quiet resistance. One boy did not write anything when the minister asked the confirmands to discuss their experiences of the exercise. This may indicate an objection to the procedure, but the minister's reaction removed the element of resistance when she invited him to join the rest at the altar, saying that actually, she had hoped that someone would react as he did. However, she did not ask for an explanation of why he did not write anything, perhaps a pedagogical trick to get the boy back on track. She did not offer opportunities for pastoral counselling ('why did you not write anything?') or for spiritual guidance ('can

I help you somehow?'). This could be because she had a different goal. The confirmands were asked to help her by talking about what they got out of the exercise. It is also of interest to the minister that one boy did not get anything out of it at all. Hanne's use of pedagogical means to delimit the discussion seems rooted in her desire for religious experience, not theological discussion.

### 5. Discussion

There seem to be two especially critical points in the situation described here. The first is that Hanne appears too forceful and heavy-handed in her approach to introducing experiential religion; the second is the lack of theological depth in her presentation of experiential religion.

Hanne's project is vulnerable to rebellion and resistance. The right atmosphere must evolve, an atmosphere of silence and focus created by dimmed lights and music (Böhme, 2006). Though kind and respectful, she pressures the boy from the Boys' Brigade to share his experience, and she curbs or ignores signs of resistance. Thus, her practices suggest that she values the execution of the exercise more than the confirmands' privacy.

Hanne's problem is not new. As mentioned above, the original Confirmand Law of 1736 states that the minister should make some of the confirmands speak about their feelings if they feel prompted to act in a certain way by a will higher than their own. However, when the law was published, one of the persons behind the law, Bishop Worm, protested against this paragraph, and argued that it was hardly possible to ask a child about this kind of information, even if it was done in the gentlest way (Lindhardt, 1936, p. 39). However, the Pietists had a point, as they wanted to know about the outcomes of experience. They wanted to know whether the confirmands' experiences were real, and indicated a true and lasting change. This is addressed in the discussion of the second critical point. Hanne also wants to know whether the confirmands' experience is real. Yet, Hanne understands the nature of the experience different from Pietism. To Hanne the experience is purely positive. In this sense she is not heavy-handed, but instead gentle, in keeping with a 'tendency to make Christianity softer' (Nielsen, 2020, p. 207, my translation).

The second critical point acknowledges that Hanne's procedure may lead to a genuine spiritual experience, but that the effect is not necessarily a lasting one. This presents an opportunity for theological discussion. In his review of two textbooks about confirmation, the Danish theologian Hans Vium Mikkelsen refers to Svend Bjerg, a Danish scholar who mentions two types of religious experience, namely *Erlebnis*, a spiritual glimpse of the divine without lasting effects, and *Erfahrung*, a lifelong change (Mikkelsen, 2009). I do not know whether Hanne's project led to real change, or whether she thought that this would be the result in at least some cases. However, this is beyond the scope of this article, but may appear as a problem that deserves further discussion.

### 6. Conclusion

I have shown that experiential religion is introduced as a practice in confirmation training in the ELCD. This is similar to trends found in international studies (e.g. Wolteich & Schneider, 2013; Koch & Sonnenberg, 2009; Holmqvist, 2015) as well as research in other church practices in the ELCD (Rønkilde and Demant, 2020). However, this is a new finding in the ELCD's confirmation work, which is my primary focus. I have investigated the minister's theologies as unfolded through this practice, and examined the roles of both minister and confirmands with respect to experiential religion.

The introduction of experiential religion in confirmation training introduces two principal problems or challenges, both of which relate to my finding that there is a connection between the experiential learning mode and a return to Pietism, in a modified form. One challenge presents a learning theory dilemma, the other is more specifically theological.

The learning theory dilemma concerns the complex role of the minister during the pew exercise. The experience of the exercise is subjective, therefore Hanne cannot know about the confirmands' experience, but it is still important for her to know something about it. She meets this challenge by having the young people write about their impressions of the exercise, but later, when she asks them about their experience, the difficulties are revealed. This type of learning involves the participants in a personal way, and does not offer the opportunity to distance oneself from what happens. They may feel that sharing their experiences transgresses personal boundaries. The second challenge is theological. The case description and Hanne's expectations of the outcome of her work reveal a tendency to a kind of 'Pietism lite', without ethical consequences. In light of Bjerg's analysis of the concept of experience (2006), one may question whether Hanne goes far and deep enough in her efforts to introduce spiritual exercises.

Both the pedagogical dilemma and theological challenge are closely connected to the introduction of experiential religion. The former involves a delicate situation where the minister cannot know whether she successfully created a setting that the confirmands can or will share. She has to be extremely careful in her selection of didactic approaches to determine the outcome of her efforts. The theological challenge offers opportunities for new work and reflections.

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