

# CASE STUDY: A NORDIC RITE OF PASSAGE COMES OF AGE

*Jeltje Gordon-Lennox*

Confirmation as a rite of passage for coming of age has deep roots in traditional Nordic culture. For hundreds of years Nordic state churches held the key to adulthood. Until 1849, young people could not legally marry, hold adult jobs or even wear adult clothing until they had been approved by their parson and confirmed by the church in a public ceremony. While confirmation remained a significant sign of the passage from youth to adulthood in all Nordic countries until the early 1900s, it is no longer obligatory. Furthermore, young people now have a choice between a religious or secular confirmation. Each year about 17 per cent of all young Norwegians,<sup>1</sup> 8.5 per cent of Icelandic youth,<sup>2</sup> 1.5 per cent of Finnish youth<sup>3</sup> and a smaller percentage of young people in Denmark and Sweden are confirmed in humanist or secular ceremonies.

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  - 3 According to Tuomas Rutanen of the Finnish Prometheus Camps Association (Prometheus-leirin tuki ry), 1.5 per cent or 853 Finnish youth attended the humanist camps in 2015.

# EMERGING RITUAL IN SECULAR SOCIETIES

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY  
CONVERSATION

Edited by  
Jeltje Gordon-Lennox



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# CASE STUDY: A NORDIC RITE OF PASSAGE COMES OF AGE

*Jeltje Gordon-Lennox*

Confirmation as a rite of passage for coming of age has deep roots in traditional Nordic culture. For hundreds of years Nordic state churches held the key to adulthood. Until 1849, young people could not legally marry, hold adult jobs or even wear adult clothing until they had been approved by their parson and confirmed by the church in a public ceremony. While confirmation remained a significant sign of the passage from youth to adulthood in all Nordic countries until the early 1900s, it is no longer obligatory. Furthermore, young people now have a choice between a religious or secular confirmation. Each year about 17 per cent of all young Norwegians,<sup>1</sup> 8.5 per cent of Icelandic youth,<sup>2</sup> 1.5 per cent of Finnish youth<sup>3</sup> and a smaller percentage of young people in Denmark and Sweden are confirmed in humanist or secular ceremonies.

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As in the past, young people aged 14 to 16 wear special clothes at the ceremony, and their family members come from afar to celebrate in family festivities planned long in advance. The biggest change in this old Nordic tradition is the non-religious content of the secular confirmations and the fact that the venue is no longer a church building but a concert hall, a medieval castle, a municipal cinema, a cultural centre or a city hall or community building.

The confirmation tradition – whether religious or humanist – is now so interwoven into Nordic culture and society that it has become an integral part of strong family traditions in the countries that formerly comprised the Kingdom of Denmark: Norway, Iceland and Denmark. This study examines the evolution of non-religious confirmation ceremonies in these three countries.

## HOW DID THIS CHANGE COME ABOUT?

### A bit about the history of confirmation

In order to understand the importance of confirmation in Nordic society today, we must take a brief look at the origins of confirmation. In the early years of the Christian Church, three Sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist/Communion – were celebrated together by bishops for adult catechumens at the Easter Vigil. Over time, the three sacraments were associated with separate moments in Christian life. As Christianity spread northwards with the Romans and much of Europe became Catholic, confirmation began to be practiced at adolescence rather than infancy. During the Middle Ages, it became known as the sacrament of (spiritual) maturity. In 1308, the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church warns: ‘Although Confirmation is sometimes called the “sacrament of Christian maturity”, we must not confuse adult faith with the adult age of natural growth, nor forget that the baptismal grace is a grace of free, unmerited election and does not need “ratification” to become effective.’ As Christianity spread northwards with the Romans and much of Europe became Catholic, confirmation began to be practised at adolescence rather than infancy. During the Middle Ages, it became

known as the sacrament of (spiritual) maturity. Youth, confirmed between the ages 12 and 15, were regarded as old enough and ready to live active, responsible Christian lives.

### Confirmation in Nordic countries

The history of confirmation in the Nordic countries and their associated territories is inextricably intertwined. From about 1397 to 1523, Denmark, Sweden (which then included Finland) and Norway, together with Norway's overseas dependencies (Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Northern Isles) were joined under the Union of Kalmaris. Although the states legally retained their sovereignty, one single monarch, the King of Denmark, directed most of their policies. With the breakaway of Sweden in 1523, the Union of Kalmaris was effectively dissolved.

In 1536, King Christian III joined the Reformation movement and imposed Lutheranism on his extended kingdom, which then covered an area that now constitutes most of Denmark, Norway and Iceland. The King – like his favoured theologian – rejected confirmation as a sacrament, and it fell into relative disuse. Some Lutherans, however, followed Luther's advice to retain confirmation as a public rite for children.<sup>4</sup> The practice reappeared late in the 17th century in a somewhat different form under the influence of Pietism. This Protestant movement from Germany, with its strong emphasis on individual devotion, paved the way for compulsory confirmation.

King Christian VI reintroduced the confirmation of youth in 1736 as a legal and religious rite. Compulsory confirmation contributed to a rise in the level of literacy and to the institution of regular schooling throughout the Kingdom. As from 1814, the School Law applied free, obligatory education for all children from six or seven years old and until their confirmation seven years later. All young people aged 14 to 19

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4 'Urge magistrates and parents to rule well and to send their children to school...train children to be pastors, preachers, clerks [also for other offices, with which we cannot dispense in this life], etc... Since the tyranny of the Pope has been abolished, people are no longer willing to go to the Sacrament and despise it [as something useless and unnecessary]' (Luther 1529).



– regardless of their social status or gender – were required to learn the catechism by heart. Catechetical teaching usually took place during the winter months and was followed by a public examination ceremony held on a Sunday three to four weeks after Easter. The successful ‘confirmands’<sup>5</sup> received their first communion and acquired civil rights that included the right to wear adult clothing, marry, become an apprentice, a soldier, a witness or a godparent. Those who failed the examination spent another winter studying and were examined again the following year. Those who did not succeed in passing the examination by age 19 could be punished with a prison sentence or even forced labour.

Although the Danish–Norwegian union was dissolved in 1814, Iceland remained a possession of Denmark until 1944. As from 1849, the Constitutional Act of Denmark ensured the freedom of thought and religion in Denmark and its territories. Confirmation continued to be an important rite for Nordic society, but it was no longer the determining factor for access to civil rights.

## HUMANIST CONFIRMATIONS IN NORWAY

*LENE MÜRER IN COLLABORATION WITH SIRI SANDBERG AND INGER-JOHANNE SLAATTA (NORWEGIAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION)*

Until 1911, Christian confirmation was compulsory in Norway. In 1951, the Norwegian Humanist Association (NHA) established a secular alternative so that non-religious youth could confirm and keep their integrity; 34 confirmands chose this option and participated in the ceremony in Oslo. Every year since then, Norwegian youth have had the option of doing a humanist or a church confirmation. Moreover, the NHA has used its vast experience with humanist confirmations to guide some of the associations in neighbouring countries as they put secular confirmation ceremonies into place for their youth.

In the early days, humanist confirmations were not well received. When the Minister of Church Affairs accepted the NHA’s invitation to

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5 A confirmand is a person, usually a young person, who has begun the process of becoming a candidate for confirmation or affirmation of baptism.

attend that first ceremony, the Norwegian Parliament debated the issue for two hours. Fortunately, times have changed. While the majority of 15-year-olds are still confirmed in the Lutheran tradition, a growing minority of youth today opt for a humanist confirmation to celebrate their coming of age. Some 10,000 young Norwegians participate in humanist confirmations each year.



**Figure 5.1.** The first humanist confirmation in Norway (Oslo, 1956)

*'I remember the day of the confirmation. The outfit I wore, with a pretty blouse, a purse and a fancy umbrella. An actor read a poem, an opera singer sang and the town orchestra played. The ceremony was lovely. It was hard to make a different choice than what was the norm, but I have made untraditional choices later too which have influenced my life.'* (Gry from Oslo was a confirmand in 1957.)

### The humanist programme

The young people who choose to do a humanist confirmation come from all socio-economic backgrounds and represent a wide range of the

cultures present today in Norway. The confirmands hail from the entire country; from big urban areas such as Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim, from the small towns in the south with their white painted wooden houses, and from the sparsely populated areas in the far north where the Sami communities live. Some of the youth genuinely want to learn more about the humanist perspective. Others come to discuss issues and topics important to them in their lives. Not all are so serious: many come for the festive ceremony. More recently, young people participate because humanist confirmation has become part of their family tradition. After 65 years, humanist confirmation may well be a tradition for several generations of a humanist family! There are, of course, those who are mostly interested in the gifts they will receive at their family gathering. Most of the confirmands want a humanist confirmation for a mixture of reasons. For all, confirmation represents a proud moment for the young people and their families.



**Figure 5.2.** Youth number 250,000 in a humanist confirmation in Norway (Arendal, 2016) Stina (sitting in the chair) is from Arendal, Norway. The young people with whom she prepared for her confirmation in 2016 are standing around her. The poster she holds states that she is the 250,000th Norwegian to be confirmed in a humanist ceremony. In speaking about her experience Stina said: 'I have learned a lot about humanism and human rights, but I have learned even more about myself.'

### The course

In preparation for the confirmation ceremony, the youth participate in a course designed to awaken the confirmands' curiosity. It gives them a starting point for discussion and learning about humanism, their own life stance and human rights. Helping the confirmands structure their often unstructured thoughts and clearly expose their opinions in a safe, social environment is a big task. The main objective of the course is not to supply easy answers, but to encourage reflection and critical thinking. It represents one step on the path to adult life. It is also a support for young people as they face the challenges of daily life.



**Figure 5.3.** A course in humanist confirmation in Norway (2010)  
'I remember the thought-provoking discussions from the course. It felt like a good place to learn to discuss. We had course leaders who were enthusiastic and managed to engage the youth in discussion. I got to know other young people who I would not otherwise have gotten to know.' (Helga was confirmed in Mandal in 1986.)

Volunteers who receive special training in how to guide discussions with teenagers lead the course. They have an array of appropriate exercises at their disposal, and aim for a practical approach rather than the more theoretical methods used at school. Among the confirmands' resources for discussion is an illustrated book with texts and quotations called

*Think About It!* (NHA 2012). Some confirmands use the book during the course while others read it in their own time.



**Figure 5.4.** The humanist confirmation ceremony in Oslo in 2002 took place at the town hall

Three subjects are a mandatory part of the course: humanism, critical thinking and human rights. With this as a basis, the young people in each group usually influence the content of their course. With support from the leaders they explore who they are and how to determine what is important and right for them and their life. The leaders often get the young people started with exercises or questions that get the discussion going on a concrete level. Once engaged, the youth are often capable of taking the discussion to more abstract levels. Some groups tackle friendship, identity and personal boundaries. Others talk more about ethics and social responsibility.

The young people are supported as they examine their own and others' attitudes critically. They learn that it takes courage to stand up for their opinions but also to change their mind. An important step in becoming a critical thinker is to ask questions. The course may well leave them with more questions than answers.



**Figure 5.5.** A confirmand in traditional Norwegian dress has her photo taken with her family after the humanist confirmation ceremony in Oslo, Norway (2014)

### The ceremony

At the end of the course, the youths celebrate their confirmation with a festive, solemn and dignified ceremony. Humanist confirmations are held on Saturday or Sunday, mainly from late April to late May. Families gather to see their young people, in formal dress, take a step towards adulthood. The ceremonies focus on the young person's importance to family and society: on what it means to make good decisions, to get support from adults, to take a stand in important matters, and to contribute to making the world a better place. It includes processions, speeches addressed to and from the confirmands, music, singing, reciting poetry and awarding diplomas. After the ceremony, most of the parents honour their child's coming of age with a big family celebration.

People believed I might end up in hell, and would pray for me. Some of my family did not attend my confirmation. I think my confirmation has made me stronger and made it easier for me to make hard choices later on in life.

(Grethe, the first humanist confirmand from the town of Namsos, Norway in 1976)

Last year I met an old acquaintance who told me that I am one of the few people he knows that is still true to the values and ideals of my youth. I am really proud of that. Too many people just float along and never think about who they want to be. Be critical, ask questions and take responsibility for your actions!

(Gøril confirmed in Bodø, Norway in 1981)

## CIVIL CONFIRMATIONS IN ICELAND

*BJARNI JÓNSSON (SIÐMENNT, THE ICELANDIC ETHICAL HUMANIST ASSOCIATION)*

In 2017, Siðmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association (IEHA), celebrates 29 years of civil (secular) confirmations in Iceland. The confirmation programme, which grew out of parents' desire to give Icelandic youth an alternative to religious confirmation, brought about the founding of the Association, which officially dates to 1989. It now provides secular ceremonies for all of the major transitions in life.

Participation in the humanist confirmation programme is open to all youth; membership is not a requirement. In fact, the Association actively discourages parents from enrolling their children into the organization before they are 16. The Association's mission statement, which was adopted in 2005, is based on the 2002 Humanist Manifesto of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Nonetheless, unlike the Christian confirmation, secular confirmands are not required to adhere to any dogma or to take an oath.

We especially appreciated the philosophical content of the preparation course; the focus on the child and his or her position in society, responsibility, moral awareness and concepts such as justice, friendship, fairness and more were discussed on a peer basis.

(Sigurður, father of a young person confirmed by Siðmennt)

The civil confirmation course (especially ethics/philosophy) was excellent with its emphasis on tolerance towards other religions and life stances. The ceremony was also wonderful; grandparents who had been very sceptical about civil confirmation were ecstatic!

(Margrét, mother of a young person confirmed by Siðmennt)

On average, 300 Icelandic teenagers participate in the secular confirmation programme every year. There are 12 to 14 classes every winter for those in cities. Those who live in outlying areas can take the course in two intensive weekends. The teachers of the programme are usually philosophers. In preparation for their civil confirmation, young people meet in groups for discussions about ethics, personal relationships, human rights, equality, critical thinking, relations between the sexes, the prevention of substance abuse, scepticism, protecting the environment, getting along with parents and being a teenager in a consumer society. In short, they learn about what it means to be an adult in contemporary society, and how to take responsibility for their own views and behaviour.

The course is crowned with a formal graduation ceremony in the spring. There may be anywhere from 7 to 12 ceremonies in various parts of the country. During the ceremony, some of the confirmands perform music, read poetry or give speeches. Prominent members of Icelandic society also speak about the importance of their coming into adulthood. All of the confirmands receive diplomas. Well over 3000 Icelanders have now chosen this alternative to religious confirmation. By the spring of 2017, approximately 35,000 guests will have attended a civil confirmation ceremony in Iceland.

In addition to a long-standing working relationship with the NHA, the Association recently engaged in an inter-Nordic network of Humanist Associations as well as with the British Humanist Association (BHA).





**Figure 5.6.** Humanist confirmation ceremony in Reykjavik, 24 April 2016  
The humanist confirmation ceremony was held in a cinema called Haskolabio. The words 'freedom, human dignity and shared responsibility' are written on the screen behind the group of young confirmands.



**Figure 5.7.** Humanist confirmation ceremony in Copenhagen, 30 May 2015  
The confirmation ceremony portrayed here took place at the Black Diamond concert hall in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

### **Objectives of Danish humanist confirmation**

The aim of the secular confirmation programmes is to strengthen humanist values in society. Humanist confirmations are open to all young people who want to examine their life stance, that is, their relation with what they accept as being of ultimate importance. This involves the presuppositions and theories upon which such a stance could be made, a belief system and a commitment to potentially working it out in one's life.

The course is intended to strengthen young people's capacity to think independently and to act ethically. It encourages:

- developing insights into one's own experiences, actions and behaviour
- reflection and critical questioning
- awareness of the one's life stance
- circumspection, respectfulness, tolerance and responsibility.

The ceremony is designed to give young people an opportunity to formulate their life stance and to get support from their family and society in living up to their ideals.

## **SECULAR CONFIRMATIONS IN DENMARK**

MARIE LOUISE PETERSEN (DANISH HUMANIST SOCIETY)

Nothing reflects the meaning of confirmation to the Danish better than the phrase *At træde ind i de voksnes rækker*, which states that the young person literally 'has stepped into the ranks of the adults'. Confirmation is still the main mark for Danish youth of their transition into adulthood today. Yet these young people are much less likely to opt for a humanist confirmation than their equally secular Nordic neighbours. This is in large part due to the history of confirmation in Denmark.

### Non-religious confirmations appear and disappear

In 1909, obligatory public examination was outlawed and youth were confirmed as long as they regularly attended the preparation courses. At that time, approximately 98 per cent of the Danish were members of the official church (*Folkekirken* or the People's Church). The first civil confirmation took place in 1915 in Copenhagen; four girls were confirmed in this ceremony organized by the Association Against Church Confirmation. The group, later known as an association for Civil Confirmation, was founded by a working-class party called the Social Democrats, which fought for the separation of church and state. During the 1930s, nearly 2 per cent of Danish youth chose to be confirmed in a civil ceremony. In the 1970s, the popularity of both civil and Christian ceremonies declined and, in 1992, the Association was disbanded (Kaiser 1992).

Around the same time, a number of young people began to organize their 'non-firmation'. This minimalist formula, which remains popular today, involves skipping the ceremony and just having a party. The traditional family party is such an important event that many Danish parents will celebrate their child's 15th birthday with a big gathering, whether or not there is a confirmation ceremony.

### Humanist confirmation

In 2008, Humanistisk Samfund, the Danish Humanist Society, was founded with assistance from its sister organization in Norway, the NHA. Providing humanist ceremonies was given high priority – in particular, for funerals. The first humanist confirmation was organized in 2010. The event represented hours and hours of volunteer work that began with long discussions about what to call the ceremony. The Danish group wanted to avoid potential confusion and the irrefutable religious connotations of the old term, but in the end, decided to follow the Norwegian lead and call their ceremony a humanist 'confirmation'.

Eleven youths from all over Denmark travelled to Copenhagen for that first humanist ceremony; the next year the number doubled. In 2012, thanks to the involvement of qualified volunteers like Annette Bøgh, a mother with a degree in philosophy, there were enough young people for two ceremonies. Annette says:

I committed myself in building up the humanist confirmation course in West Denmark because I felt strongly about being able to offer this option to my son and other young people in West Denmark! I'm still part of it and I enjoy it. Our family is not religious – however, I think that rites of passage are valuable for all young people, regardless of their view on life.

In May 2016, three ceremonies were held in two parts of Denmark for a total of 92 confirmands. The humanist confirmation is now the Danish Humanist Society's most popular offer.

### The humanist programme

The Danish built their humanist programme for coming of age ceremonies on the traditional and new models. Preparation takes place during the winter and in the early spring. The course is held over two intensive weekends in a scouts' hut or at a youth hostel. Danish youth explore issues related to humanism, human rights, ethics, identity and critical thinking. Optional subjects include sexuality, alcohol and drugs. Discussions are enhanced by group work, role-playing, games, drawing, singing and physical exercise; there are a few short lectures.

The ceremony takes place on a Saturday in early May. Each confirmand can bring a maximum of nine to ten guests. In 2016 it was held in the concert hall of the Royal Library in Copenhagen and in a historical theatre in Aarhus in Jutland. The ceremony, which lasts about an hour, includes singing and a speech from a well-known person. One of the most moving moments is when the confirmands describe in their own words what humanism means to them. Each confirmand is called up by his or her full name, presented with a certificate for the course, the Human Rights Declaration and a rose. At the close of the ceremony, the assembly sings as all of the confirmands stand together at the front. The assembly then rises and applauds as the young adults exit in a procession. Afterwards there is a small reception for the families while pictures are taken of the confirmands and their course leaders. Most families leave rather quickly to get ready for their big family gathering. Unique to Denmark

is a countrywide celebration called 'Blue Monday' (Blå Mandag),<sup>6</sup> when the confirmands skip class to show off their new status and clothes, and just have fun.

#### A paradoxical relationship between church and state

One of the reasons for the ambivalent attitude towards secular confirmation lies in a persistent paradoxical relationship between the 'state' religion and the Danish state. According to a recent survey, the percentage of church members dropped from 81 per cent in 2010 to 78 per cent in 2015. Few church members are regular churchgoers, and at least 35 per cent say they do not believe in God.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that church membership is conferred by baptism (usually infancy), not by confirmation. Once a person is registered as having been baptized, they are considered a member of the church and are subject to church tax.<sup>8</sup> People must take special action to renounce their membership.

Furthermore, children in schools run by the municipalities receive instruction in Christian studies throughout their primary and lower secondary school education.<sup>9</sup> Teachers are free to give instruction in world religions or philosophy, but there is no obligation to do so before the eighth grade when the students are 13 to 14 years old, the age when most students are confirmed. Danish teens, like those everywhere, have busy schedules. By law, the school system must facilitate teens' preparation for church confirmation by allowing them to participate in these courses during school hours. According to official statistics, nearly 70 per cent of all Danish youth opt for church confirmations. Whereas some rural

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6 The Blue Monday tradition in Denmark seems to date back to the 18th century. Most schools give the confirmands the day off from classes. Together with their classmates, they put on their 'Second Day Clothes' and go to town to enjoy themselves, spend money and may end up partying. Sometimes this includes drinking alcohol. In many schools they get lectures and pamphlets about how to have a safe Blue Monday.

7 See <http://politiken.dk/debat/analyse/ECE1004535/saadan-ser-danskerne-paa-gud-og-kirke/>, accessed on 29 June 2016.

8 Danish church tax varies from 0.5 to 1.2 per cent of gross salary, depending on the rules of the municipality where the citizen lives.

9 Praying and preaching have not been permitted during lessons about Christianity since 1975.

regions register church confirmations for 84.5 per cent of the youth, in the region around Copenhagen the percentage drops to 40.6 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

Since I never really believed in God, I was interested in a humanist confirmation. To me humanism basically means that you trust in humankind and are convinced that people can take responsibility for their own lives – without any approval from god or an almighty power. Of course, I also wanted a confirmation party with all the trimmings. I'm glad I could take the confirmation course and be confirmed in a ceremony. I got exactly what my friends got, only without God.

(Katinka, confirmed in 2010 in Copenhagen)

I enjoyed my confirmation – every bit of it. I can feel the difference: People who know I confirmed say: 'he has passed that age'. Now, when I discuss politics, I feel like I am taken more seriously. For me, the high point of the ceremony was delivering my short speech. I really sensed that I was trusted with a great responsibility. Wearing my first suit for the ceremony added to that feeling of going through a transition. Doing 'Blue Monday' together with my class was also really important. It is something we will always remember.

(August, confirmed in 2013 in Aarhus, West Denmark)

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<sup>10</sup> Some 47,746 young people (14–15 years old) were confirmed in the *Folkekirken* in 2014. See [www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/konfirmerede](http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/konfirmerede), accessed on 29 June 2016.