The Material Logics
of Confirmation

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the material spaces and logics of religious learning processes. A discrepancy between religious educators and the 14-year-old confirmands was evident during a 1 year of ethnographic fieldwork. A material semiotic approach provides important perspectives on the dynamics between material and human actors in religious learning context. The findings suggest that different notions of space with different logics of religious learning were established during the confirmation program. The spaces and logics were constituted by the interplay with material objects, pastors, catechists and confirmands. The paper points to how materiality is part of religious learning and how materiality can open up for different ways of practicing and conceptualize religion.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Confirmation, Learning, Material Learning, Material Logics, Material Semiotics, Religion, Religious Learning, Space

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the spaces for confirmands' learning processes with the analytical lens of material semiotics and actor-network theory (ANT). In this paper, I use ANT perspectives on a religious educational practice; confirmation within the Lutheran Church of Norway. Confirmation stems from an era of stern religious rule where Lutheran Christianity was the only religion approved by the King. When introduced in Norway in 1736, confirmation was compulsory for every citizen until 1911. Although confirmation was a forced practice, it had a large impact on the Norwegian society. Through confirmation, ordinary people learnt to read and confirmation became a rite of passage into adulthood (Salomonsen, 2007). Today confirmation is a voluntary 8 month religious educational program. The confirmation day is celebrated with a large family feast. Salomonsen argues that this family feast is unique in a Scandinavian context and one of the reasons of the prevailing popularity of confirmation (Salomonsen, 2007, p. 169). The Norwegian Folk Church has a large membership (77% of the Norwegian society)[1] but low participation (3% at Sunday services)[2]. However, approximately 67% of Norwegian 14-year-olds participate in the religious practice of confirmation (Schweitzer, Ilg, & Simojoki, 2010, p. 165). In Norwegian confirmation, old

traditions from a homogeneous religious society meet a complex, plural, late modernity. This places confirmation at an intersection inhabited by experienced religious "insiders" and newcomers who share and explore the same practice of religious learning. During 1 year of ethnographic fieldwork with three confirmation programs in Norway, a discrepancy between the religious educators and the confirmands was clear. Though they shared physical space, the different actors appeared to belong to different worlds. This study suggests that the interplay between confirmands, religious educators, and the material environment establishes different notions of space.

As stated by Fenwick and Edwards there are relatively few ANT analyses of educational practices but that ANT has a potential in analyzing processes that are often unmentioned (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011, p. ix).

In this paper, I explore how these spaces are categorized by different logics for religious learning and how they constitute religion as a whole. This empirical study was based on the material semiotic traditions of actor-network theory (ANT), science and technology studies (STS), and socio-material theories in educational research (Fenwick et al., 2011; Latour, 2005; Law, 2007; Law & Mol, 2002; Sørensen, 2009). The paper also draws on recent contributions to the materiality of religion (McGuire, 2008; Vásquez, 2011; Woodhead, 2011).

2. STUDIES ON CONFIRMATION AND RELIGIOUS LEARNING

Studies on religious learning often focus on a formal school setting (Haakedal, 2012; Valk, 2009; Van der Zee, Hermans, & Aarnoutse, 2006; Vermeer, 2012). In confirmation, religious learning takes place outside of school and is part of local congregations' religious learning activities. A significant contribution to the inquiry of this type of religious activity was the comparative study on confirmation work (Schweitzer et al., 2010). This extensive quantitative project provided a valuable map of confirmation work in Europe. Still there is need for further research on how learning and didactics are developed in confirmation (Schweitzer et al., 2010, p. 291).

Jarvis investigated religious learning as an experiential phenomenon involving primary experiences that create disjunctions (Jarvis, 2008, p. 557). Hermans emphasized religious learning as a participatory practice (Hermans, 2003), and de Kock argued for an apprenticeship model as the preferred catechetical strategy (de Kock, 2012). These scholars focused on religious learning as more than the ability to articulate statements of belief. Yet, the studies do not sufficiently address the complex processes of materiality in these religious experiences. Reite's study however, on pastors' professional learning is an example of how material networks are part of establishing learning processes (Reite, 2013).

This paper argues that the interplay of individuals and the materiality in religious practice must be taken into account. Individuals talk and act in material settings, and these settings constrict or provide affordances for individuals' actions (J. Wertsch, 1998). There is a complex relationship between humans and non-humans in any social practice, including confirmation. The ANT/STS perspectives provided a suitable conceptual apparatus to analyze this complex relationship. Drawing on spatial metaphors as analytical concepts from Law and Mol (Law, 2002; Law & Mol, 2001) and those utilized in educational studies by Sørensen (Sørensen, 2009), the analysis disclosed critical processes of religious learning in the empirical material.

Confirmation is a complex social and material activity. Through bits and pieces, this complex socio-materiality constructs various patterns of meaning, discourses, or logics. The study will answer the following research question: In what way are spaces for religious learning constructed with material objects, confirmands, and religious educators as they participate in the practices of confirmation, and how do these spaces order logics for religious learning and religion?

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