

Secular Students in a Religious Environment. Oslo-Students on Internship in Africa

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Abstract

Early Childhood students from Oslo may participate in a 3 months internship in 3 African countries. We have challenged a group of students from the last 5 years of the program to respond to how they experienced the religious atmosphere in and outside the kindergartens. Although their own home country has a strong Christian heritage, the present-day society is rather secularized, and religious vocabulary is not common in everyday speech. The contrast to the African countries is striking. They encounter a clearly verbalized religious upbringing in the kindergartens, even to the point where religious faith becomes part of the discipline. How did they react to these experiences, as well as to the many personal questions about their own faith? We describe and analyze these responses.

Key words: Internship in Africa, Secular background, Religious community, Religious upbringing, Faith and discipline.

Introduction

This article is based upon a variety of feedbacks from Norwegian Early Childhood students on a 3-months internship in African kindergartens, the most recent responses being a questionnaire to 12 students, and a focus-conversation with 4 students, all from the period of 2010-2014. Other feedbacks include weekly assignments (Reflection-notes), and Group-reports from our students. The present writer has supervised the program since the start in 2000, and has annually been on visits to the relevant areas and kindergartens assessing the program. The article has both a descriptive as well as analytical character.

The focus of the present research-project

Our students encounter a society strongly influenced by religion, mainly Christianity, and they relate to adults and children in the kindergartens, where most events and problems seem to be treated in a religious context, and the religious vocabulary in everyday life situations is considered quite natural. This is in striking contrast to the

secularized background of the students, where religious terminology is rare, often considered personal and private, maybe even taboo. Our research-question is therefore: *How do our secularized students cope with and respond to the religious atmosphere in the kindergartens? Is it easy and natural to relate to or is it problematic?* The Early Childhood students from Norway are brought up in a gradually secularized society, even if some of them may have a religious upbringing and personal faith. They responded very differently when asked about their own religious affiliation. Most of them are members of the Lutheran Church of Norway, but only a few are active members. Some value the traditions and like to be a part of it, without being too religious. Others are members, but without any religious interest at all. Among the non-members some are clearly not interested in religion, while others consider religion exciting and challenging, as a cultural phenomenon. This article is not a comparative sociological description of the role of religion in the societies involved. We are focusing on the experiences of the students in their internship. However, in order to answer our research-question, we need to describe briefly the situation in the 3 countries involved, as well as clarify the content of being brought up in a secularized society. The student-responses will obviously vary due to their own personal faith and commitment.

Short Introduction of the 3 countries involved, Namibia, Zambia, Ghana

The present program was initiated in 2000 in Namibia, and expanded to Ghana in 2003, and to Zambia in 2007, as a result of personal contacts and institutional relations.

Namibia

Namibia is a large country but with a population of only 2,5 million. The country is struggling with HiV/Aids, and has a life expectancy of only 40-43 years. English has replaced Afrikans as the official channel of communication and education, with 7 tribal language given semi-official status, in addition to Afrikans and German. The dominant religion is Christianity (80-90%), with traditional religions counting 10-20%. (see links)

There are 4 colleges offering Teacher Education (4-year course), however, they do not have any specified courses in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The Faculty of Education at the University of Namibia (UNAM) has a Bachelor-program in General Education, and from 2011 initiated a Master-course in ECE.

The Ministry of Education is however focusing on the 5-year olds, through the «Pre-primary Syllabus» initiated in 2006, by the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), running regional courses for unskilled staff in the kindergartens. This syllabus has now become an integral part and responsibility of the Primary schools.

Ghana

Ghana with its 25 million inhabitants is considered quite developed, although still struggling with poverty. There are about 70% Christians, 20% Muslims, mainly in the border areas, and 10 % practicing traditional religions. English is the official language of the country, but 9 out of 50 tribal languages are government-sponsored. (see links)

The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) was the first institution in West-Africa to offer a 4 year Bachelor-program in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) from 2007, with a Master-program in ECCD being in progress. There is a strong focus on Education not the least through the government-sponsored program of “Education for ALL”, aiming at upgrading the last year in Kindergarten (the 5 year olds).

Zambia

Zambia has a population of 15 million, and is also struggling with HiV/Aids, with a life expectancy of only 38-40 years. English is the official channel of communication and education, with 9 out of 70 tribal languages given official status. Christianity counts for 60-70%, Islam and Hinduism 20-30%, with traditional religions making up 10-20%. (see links)

There are 2 colleges, in Kitwe and Livingstone, offering 3 year diploma-courses in ECE. The University of Zambia in Lusaka has a Bachelor of Education but unfortunately with little emphasis on ECE. The Ministry of Education, however, renewed its focus on Kindergarten and Teacher-education as early as in 2004, with more concrete results to be expected in the near future.

Content and Goals

These 3 countries have many common goals and strategies. Viewing their Curricula, we find in both Namibia and Zambia the following areas mentioned: Language, Creativity, Physical & emotional development, Attitudes & values, Culture & patriotism, Morals, Religious & spiritual development, and Care for children with special needs. Ghana has focus on the 5 main areas of Literacy and Numeracy skills, Creative arts, Physical education, and Life skills. Ghana's "Poverty Reduction Strategy" calls for upgrading the status of the Kindergarten, as a vital tool in combating poverty.

In all 3 countries, many kindergartens are run by churches, private persons, or NGOs. Very few of the staff have General or EC-teacher education, some have short courses, and others have no relevant education at all. In Ghana, however, the increase of qualified EC-teachers is most noticeable. In all 3 countries the kindergartens are considered a strong and necessary basis for future school-education, and therefore a vital tool for the future life of both the child and its larger family.

Oslo-students on kindergarten-internship in Africa

The goal of the internship, as expressed in the Curriculum, is to give our students

- a better understanding of diverse cultural circumstances and how this influences the upbringing of children
- further insight into how pedagogical theories can be accommodated to different cultural circumstances
- a better understanding of the situation of children in the third world
- experiences of what intercultural communication implies
- consciousness about one's own values and attitudes
- a widened perspective on one's own understanding of reality as well as that of others. (Curriculum of Alternative semester abroad, see link)

We believe that through achieving these goals, our students will be better equipped for dealing with the multicultural setting of many kindergartens in present-day Norway.

The Oslo-students, being in their final year of their Bachelor-program, are in a dilemma of being both qualified and competent ECE-teachers, but at the same time being guests in a foreign culture, and may therefore be met with both high expectations as well as distance. They encounter the African class-room with large classes, few adults with relevant competence, and therefore very traditional education focusing on rote-learning, and strict discipline, in sharp contrast to the child-centered pedagogy back home.

The present Internship curriculum, put in place in 2006, has the main focus on Culture, Communication, and Values (see further analysis in Hoaas 2009 and 2014). Some of the

basic material in the course is from sources such as Ansell (2005), Baumann (1999), Dahl (2013), Eriksen (2001), Gunnestad (2004), Hundeide (1995), Jans (2004), Nieto (2010), Samovar (2013), and Ward (2001).

The students are prepared through several sessions in the Autumn semester, followed by a 2 week-period of intensive preparation right before departure in mid-January. The main topics are Cross-cultural communication, Comparative pedagogics, Culture and Ethics, and Challenges as a newcomer. Upon arrival, they are taken care of by a local coordinator, helping out with accommodation and placements in the kindergartens, as well as the many practical issues that may arise. For the first part of their stay, the students have weekly assignments concerning some experience during the week, followed later by a group report on any pedagogical or cultural issue that has awakened their interest and concern. Finally, they have an individual exam from topics treated in the curriculum. They also have the opportunity of following classes at the related academic institutions. Most of the students use their experience from the stay in their Bachelor-thesis, completed at the end of the Spring semester, where they focus on a particular topic of interest during their internship, often with a comparative perspective.

Secularization – a characteristic trait of Western societies

As one student expressed it:

In Norway, we are a secular country. The main reason I think is that we don't really 'need' something to hold on to. Here in Zambia, I think for many people, God is their only hope, for help and justice. Their faith is their means of survival in a tough world. Even though I am not a very active Christian, I can see that and appreciate that.

Norwegian background

The Lutheran Church, called “Church of Norway”, has been the “State-church” since the Reformation was introduced and took over the hegemony as early as in 1536, in the Danish-Norwegian society. The homogenous character of the population is illustrated by the fact that as late as in 1960's, 96% of the population belonged to this church. From the 1970's this relationship went through a gradual change, with decreasing numbers year by year, counting around 75% in 2015. The many rituals traditionally being totally part of the ministry of the church have also decreased. Only 60% of all children are now baptized in the Lutheran church, while marriages in the church are down to about 40%. Funerals in the church still hold the highest number, at 90%. Other ceremonies and rituals such as humanistic or civil ones, count for the rest.

In the last reform of 2012, the Church of Norway is now called a “Folk-church”, where the government no longer has a say in internal matters of the church, but still accepts the privilege of this church to a certain extent. One could say that the church is now considered part of the cultural heritage worth preserving. All religious bodies today receive financial support from the state on the same level as the Church of Norway, according to their membership, as they all are seen as bearers of important cultural traditions.

The Education reform of 1969 signified a major shift. Until then, religious education, in the Lutheran sense, had been compulsory and the only form of religious education in public schools. From 1969, religious education was to be considered part of the pedagogical program of elementary education, the subject being labeled as “Christianity, Religion, and Philosophy of Life” (KRL), with a large focus on Christianity, but with the option of exemption. Then, a reform in 1996, formulated a common subject, compulsory for all, labeled “Religion, Philosophy of Life, and Ethics” (RLE). Even if Christianity is still fairly dominant, all major religions should be given due treatment, especially in areas with many children of diverse religious background. Norwegian children in public schools therefore receive quite an extensive education in religious thinking in the different traditions, the main sources being the stories, rituals, and festivals of each religion. That is also the case in kindergartens, as formulated in the so-called Framework-plan of the Content and Task of the Kindergarten, last revision in 2011 (see link).

This is the society that our students are brought up in.

Secularization – Modern society

However, the main character of the society can hardly be interpreted only through the statistics of the church, or by the school-curricula. The general trend of all Western countries, that of secularization, is also prevalent in Norway. With the “scientific” age being introduced in the 19th century, and with reason triumphing over dogma, as postulated by Max Weber (1864-1920), the hegemony of the churches was in for a marked decline. This process has been even more evident in the post-war period, where many institutions no longer are under the control of the church, such as the judiciary, and the health- and welfare-system. (for a comprehensive analysis, see McGuire:283ff).

Perhaps the most striking change is, however, the relegation of religion to the private sphere. Peter Berger claims that this process also has influenced the religious belief of the individual, resulting in a “secularization of consciousness without the benefit of religious interpretations” (1967:107). Some religious communities see this pluralism of modern time as a threat to their very existence, and therefore choose to isolate themselves in ghettos. However, the main trend in Western countries is to have people of different religious persuasions living in the same community, and sharing the same benefits and being exposed to the same challenges.

Thus, even if “secularization” has weakened the hegemony of traditional religious bodies, it may be true to say that we are in an age of “growing *autonomy* of religious believers” (McGuire:293), where individuals construct their own religious belief and practice, a kind of “religion *à la carte*” (ibid.), for example by combining traditional church membership with a belief in reincarnation or shamanistic practices. Luckmann holds that this process of religious voluntarism does not point necessarily to the disappearance of religions, but rather a shift to a form of individualized religion, where the sense of autonomy in the private sphere makes up for the loss of autonomy of the religious institution in the public sphere (Luckmann, 1967:99, cfr. Luckmann, 1990). Charles Taylor labels this individualization-process as his 2nd category of secularity

(Taylor, 2007:2ff). Repstad in his description of religious life in modern Norway, points to the increasing “privatization” of religion, labeled partly as “folk-religiosity”, or media-religion, or civil religion (Repstad, 2000, chap.3).

Anthony Giddens addresses the issue as part of the Narcissism of the self, in modern society, that “people seek in personal life what is denied them in the public arena” (1991:170). He claims that there is a decline of traditional authority of religion, which becomes only one among many authorities in a society of indefinite pluralism of expertise. However, Giddens also underlines the complex nature of this issue, and that the classical theory of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim that religion would diminish in the modern world of science and technology is a gross oversimplification (2006:553). There is support both for the decline of religious influence in society, as well as support for new types of spirituality, not registered in the traditional religious bodies. Even if the influence of traditional religious bodies have diminished, it’s an open question whether “the appeal of religion has lost its grasp with the deepening of modernity” (ibid:569). Theories of secularization may not be able to address the transformations of religious belief in the face of profound social changes that have occurred in modern times. There are changes occurring in the blend between cultural pluralism and secularism, as exposed by Taylor and labeled as the 3rd Secularity (Taylor, 2007:11).

This is also the background of our students going to African countries for internship in kindergartens, which clearly colors many of their responses to our inquiry.

Religion in the countries of internship (Ghana, Namibia, Zambia)

The students coming to Ghana quickly discover the many Christian “catch-phrases” used on car-stickers such as “Trust in God”, “The Good Shepherd”, “Jesus is the Answer”, “Only God Knows” et al.. They also see sign-boards in front of different shops, such as “God’s Grace Pharmacy”, “Redemption Enterprise”, “The Finger of God Computer Service” et al., indeed, a surprising discovery.

Religion as part of everyday life, with special focus on Human Rights

Religion is indeed part of everyday practical life, and in the thinking of people. In matters of development, or of discussions concerning Human Rights, the religious framework is decisive. Western NGOs often find it difficult to manage the balance between their own liberal and secular basis for evaluating “good” and “bad” practices in an African country, and how to deal with what is seen as backward and inhuman (ter Haar, 2011, chaps.1, 4, and 13). This issue is focused as follows: “People whose views of fundamental rights are oriented towards religion can easily become the ideological enemies of those whose commitment to human rights is based on secular sources” (ibid:297). Furthermore, “If human rights are to be inculturated worldwide, it is necessary to give serious thought to the role played by religion as an integral part of people’s existence, inseparable from the social and moral order” (ibid:306, cfr. Kjørholt, 2011, and Dahl, chap.11).

Our students on internship experience this intimate relationship in a strong and direct way. At first it may seem a bit strange, maybe even shocking, as often in many cultural

encounters (cfr. Bennett:215-217, and Ward, chaps.2-5), but gradually they will see the values involved, even if they might disagree strongly (cfr. Storti, chap.6).

Being included in the religious environment

The students are usually invited, soon after arrival, by the host or contact-person to his or her own church. They are presented to the whole congregation and given a very warm welcome, almost to the embarrassment of the timid Norwegian students. However, they are touched by the care, concern and hospitality, as illustrated here.

- *We were introduced in the church, asked to come forward and say a few things about ourselves. We were cheered and given a great applause.*
- *Even if I am not a church-member, I felt the community spirit in a warm and inclusive way. Their commitment was strong and you had to be impressed by it.*

The students during their preparation before departure had been admonished to visit the churches as frequently as possible, and to consider them as cultural and social institutions of great importance to the local people. Some, who had a personal faith, found a church where they could feel at home, while others felt that to be difficult, as the worship traditions were far too different and hard to accommodate to. Therefore, rather few visited the churches beyond the first moments of greeting. The tourist attractions seemed to be more exciting.

- *It was nice to be introduced in the church, but a bit embarrassing, to be in the focus like that. They expected all of us to be Christians, of course, and to come regularly to their church. They probably were a bit disappointed later when we didn't come so often. We were out travelling almost every weekend.*
- *Some wanted to recruit us as members, probably hoping for donations, that made me a bit uncomfortable.*

The Oslo-students were often confronted with religion, with their own faith: «*Are you a Christian? – No, not really! – Then what are you?*» Their newly acquired African friends had a hard time in understanding the evasive answers of the Norwegian young people, “well yes, in a way. I am a member but don’t go to church very often”. Being non-religious (secular), was hard to comprehend, as some would say, “you must know whether you believe or not”. Being religious, meaning Christian, was the normal way of life. Our students responded differently to this kind of confrontation. Some felt uncomfortable, especially when urged to come to church and get baptized, and tried to evade further focus on the matter. Others felt an honest concern, and appreciated their willingness to listen, even if the response from the student was hard to comprehend. Most of the students kept a polite distance to the religious inquiries, since they felt it hard to communicate properly on the issue. ”Religion is part of their culture”, “The religious expressions, are part of their normal vocabulary.” Further responses illustrate this:

- *They were a bit worried on my behalf, when they understood that I was not a believer. They said they would pray for me, so that I would not end up in hell. But I really didn't feel bothered.*
- *They couldn't understand that I was not a believer, since I was baptized. That didn't make sense. It was interesting to see how religion was a force in their everyday life, and a motivation to get through the many trials they met.*

Religion in the kindergartens

Religion was very visible in all the kindergartens where our students were placed. Here are some of their experiences.

Songs and Morning Prayers

The daily schedule included morning prayer, saying grace before meals, and prayer and songs before going home, everything practiced in unison. For most students it was natural to take part, even if they themselves normally did not practice such rituals, others said they were only “observers”, and did not take active part.

They were also eager to know how things were practiced in Norway, and were very surprised to hear that not all people there were Christians, and therefore that prayers and songs were not common in the kindergartens. Quite shocking for some of them.

Songs and Bible stories were part of the curriculum in most kindergartens. To some of the students this reminded them of Sunday school back home, and several of the songs were familiar, as well as some of the Bible stories. But most of the students saw this as part of the “Moral teaching”, of the “Values and Norms” in society, or just as a part of their “Tradition”. As such, it was a positive experience to many.

- We had morning-prayer every day, and prayer before meals, as well as afternoon prayer. I am not a Christian, but it was not difficult to be a part of these events, as it was such an important part of the daily life of the children and of their sense of reality. Actually it gave me a strong sense of fellowship.*
- Faith and Patriotism seemed to go hand in hand. The National Anthem was followed by Christian songs and prayer, they seemed to belong together.*
- I remember the songs and stories, and the many loud “amen” after the teacher’s prayer. To me this became a positive part of my practice, and inspiring to see how natural it was for both teacher and children. As a believer myself, I felt a strong sense of fellowship during these sessions.*

Religion and Ethical Issues, with special focus on discipline

Many of the students referred to the morning prayer, songs and Bible stories, as elements that included the children in a protective fellowship. In the positive feedback, the children would hear that “God is happy with you!”, “You are in the hands of God!”. However, the religious motive could also have a very moralistic tone: “honor your father and mother” would be the religious foundation for respect and obedience toward any person in authority, including the teacher in the kindergarten. The negative feedback to unwanted behavior could be “Jesus is disappointed with you now!” The Norwegian students were rather surprised, many times shocked, to hear religion being used to discipline the children, with expressions such as “If you are the friend of God, you should do this”. Faith becomes part of the upbringing of the children, and the religious framework becomes part also of the pedagogy in the kindergarten.

- *Religion was often used as a threat. 'If you don't behave, God will be angry with you', and similar expressions. It was not a nice experience, and the children became afraid.*
- *We often heard such as 'If you don't sit still, God will punish you', even quoting from the Bible. A rather sad experience.*
- *They would tell the children that God is watching them and that they would go to hell if they didn't do as they were told. Quite shocking and hard to swallow!*

The students in our inquiry were further challenged to describe the religious atmosphere in the kindergarten, and whether they had any problems with that?

Well, the threats I felt was very problematic and uncomfortable. Otherwise, I think the children enjoyed the songs and the stories. I didn't like the mixing of traditional superstition with their Christian faith, so that illness and accidents were explained as lack of faith or even punishment, rather than going to the doctor for treatment.

Punishments are seen as part of the necessary formation process, and therefore practiced "in the best interest of the child". Physical punishment is by law not condoned in any of these countries, but is neither considered a grave violation if practiced, as long as it doesn't inflict physical injury. There are also other ways of punishing a child who has forgotten to do the homework, or gives a wrong answer in class. Many have heard the whole class chanting together with the teacher "shame, shame, shame on you", to the child in focus, now in tears. Punishments may therefore sometimes be psychological rather than physical. These practices are condoned through the God-given authority invested in the teacher's position.

Discussions of Ethical and Pedagogical Principles

Our students have many times been given the following Exam-question: "The kindergartens often have a religious frame of reference. Describe how this affects the pedagogy, and discuss the ethical challenges this might imply both for the children and for the staff." The students would often focus on what they felt to be a discrepancy between principles and everyday practice. The ideals formulated in plans and guidelines concerning the Rights of the child and the Participation of the child, as expounded by for example the Ghanian professors Jinapor and Afful-Broni, were much in line with principles known by our students, such as in Ansell and Kjørholt. However, the practical experiences of the authoritarian teachers and their strict discipline, including physical punishment, were quite different. The local teachers would explain the rights of the child, specified in the 3 P's of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), Provision, Protection, and Participation, primarily as expressions of the child being physically provided for and protected. The teachers would maintain that they have the responsibility of preparing the child for the tough life ahead, which implies obedience and loyalty towards parents and authorities (cfr. Hundeide's research). The child is in the formation process, in need of guidance and discipline, and therefore seen as a "human becoming", rather than a "human being" with all the rights that implies.

The students would sometimes argue in line with the principles of the CRC, as well as the African Charter on the Welfare of Children, that there should be no degrading treatment or abuse of any kind in the educational institutions (Art.19). Or, that any form of discipline should be administered “consistent with the child’s human dignity” (Art.28). And, that “no child shall be subjected to...inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Art.37). As mentioned, there is no disagreement with these principles in the local pedagogical education (Jinapor, Afful-Broni, Asante, and NIED). In practice, however, the everyday life in many of the kindergartens show a different reality, claiming that the children need to learn the rules of behavior if they are to survive. The main concern is their primary needs of food, clothing and shelter, in addition to education, so that they may have the chance of achieving a better life than their parents.

The Norwegian background

The Oslo-students therefore sometimes feel that the principles in their own education often become a luxury-issue, not relevant in the present everyday of their internship.

- *Children in kindergartens shall have the right to express their views on the day-to-day activities of the kindergarten.*
 - *Children shall regularly be given the opportunity to take active part in planning and assessing the activities of the kindergarten.*
 - *Children’s views shall be given due weight according to their age and maturity.*
- (Norwegian Kindergarten Act, of 2005, Section 3, Children’s right to participation)

As one of the long-time ECE-professors in Oslo explains this to imply that “one way of understanding children’s right to participation is to say that each child has the right to experience that their voice is taken seriously and has an impact on the community”. This underlines the necessity of the adult to “take the perspective of the child” (Bae:395; cfr. Jans), a rather distant view in many of the African kindergartens, where obedience is considered of utmost importance in the upbringing of the child.

Reasons for strict discipline

With these principles in mind, the Oslo-students have entered discussions with the local teachers on the issues concerning Ethics and Religion in relation to the upbringing of the children. The reasons and arguments for strict discipline may be seen as educational, that the child needs to know what is right and wrong, and that only physical discipline works. Furthermore, that “collective punishment” is an important reminder for everybody involved. Obedience to parents and authorities is an expression of obedience to God, underscored by Bible-quotations such as “Honor your father and mother”, or “Do not withhold discipline from a child” (Prov.23:13).

Some of the Oslo-students who know their Bible would point to passages in the New Testament as cautioning the adult not to overreact. “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline [guidance] and instruction of the Lord.*” (Ephesians 6:1-4). Furthermore, the words of the Lord of the Christian Church are also mentioned as a strong reminder: “*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me*” (Matthew 18:5). “*What you have done to one of the least of my brethren, you have done unto me*” (Matthew 25:40). Unfortunately, such arguments and passages

do not seem to persuade those who have learned that if you don't follow the will of God, you will face a severe afterlife.

Final Student-comments

The pivotal issue in this debate boils down to the fact that the figure of God or Jesus is used as a threat in the upbringing of the children. Religion which should bring comfort, help and encouragement for children and adults alike, especially those who live under severe circumstances, is used, or rather, is abused, to instill fear, in order to achieve the wanted result of proper behavior. This is a debate where most of our secularized students feel incompetent to enter into, due to their lack of Biblical knowledge, or lack of experience in how such issues are treated in other Christian circles, also back home.

The students were asked if they would think differently about religion and treat the topic in a different way if they were to go back again in a similar role.

- I think I would have tried to talk/discuss more about religion and how religion functions in society. But on the other hand, it's really a 'mine-field', so I am not sure I would risk that. To keep a good relationship with my host and friends would be more important for me than being critical towards religion.

- I definitely think I would address religious issues more. That is also due to my own personal development and growth, becoming more conscious and mature about my own faith. I think I would share more of my personal faith with others, and how this influences my view of children and their upbringing.

Most of the students felt they had learned a lot from their internship-experience, even if the emotions sometimes could be a bit confused.

- It was very exciting to see how religion was such a great part of the culture. In a way it was good to get away from the Norwegian culture where we don't talk about religion and are expected to manage on our own.

- I think the people of Ghana can teach Norwegians a lot, about how to be confident in what you believe in, and that it is quite natural to talk about it.

Concluding remarks

We learn from the student-responses a broad specter of experiences during their stay abroad, and in particular as related to how religion functioned in the kindergartens. Partly this was a surprising and shocking experience (Bennett, Ward), especially when related to discipline, in view of Children's Rights (Ansell, Jans, Jinapor, Kjørholt). However, as for other aspects, such as the strong emphasis on fellowship, support and care, they found it quite inspiring, often in line with well-known theory (Bae, Dahl, Hundeide). For some of the students, who had a personal faith themselves, the fervor and zeal they encountered was most interesting and made them consider their own religious practice in a new light (McGuire, Nieto). Those who were church-members, but not very active back home, were sometimes inspired to increase their knowledge and commitment, and rethink their own values. For those who at the outset were not religiously interested at all, they found the religious atmosphere, sometimes shocking and frightening, but in other circumstances also intriguing, getting a glance into a rather distant and unknown world, as in Taylor's 3rd category of Secularity, where cultural

pluralism and secularity blend together. -- These are some of the conclusions to our initial research-question about how they experienced the religious atmosphere in the kindergartens.

However, what we may conclude from the responses of all of the students is that their view from back home on how religion often has become invisible in the secularized society, has now become quite a bit more complex and varied (Afful-Broni; Giddens, 2006; Gunnestad; Luckmann, 1990). As one of them expressed it: "I wonder why we have such an 'allergy' towards religious issues at home". Maybe that could also be part of what secularized students have acquired, being exposed to a previously unknown religious environment, through their internship in Africa.

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Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks in Kindergartens (2011):

http://www.udir.no/Upload/barnehage/Rammeplan/Framework_Plan_for_the_Content_and_Tasks_of_Kindergartens_2011_rammeplan_engelsk.pdf?epslanguage=no

Alternative semester abroad [only in Norwegian]

[https://fronter.com/hioa/links/files.phtml/1215363953\\$295848038\\$/Studieinfo/Alternativ-internasjonalt-semester.pdf](https://fronter.com/hioa/links/files.phtml/1215363953$295848038$/Studieinfo/Alternativ-internasjonalt-semester.pdf)

Ghana: <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/languages.php>, and

University of Education, Winneba (UEW): <http://www.uew.edu.gh/>

Zambia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zambia>, and <http://www.zambiatourism.com/about-zambia/people>, and <http://www.educationinzambia.com/>

Namibia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namibia>, and NIED: <http://www.nied.edu.na/>, and University of Namibia (UNAM): <http://www.unam.edu.na/>

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