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## The Study Abroad Experience: Where Does Religion Fit?

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of the question: “Where does religion fit in the study abroad experience?” Students abroad are often immersed in communities where religious practice and spiritual worldviews may be widespread and privileged. This may well be one of the areas where students find themselves most disoriented, and may represent one of the greatest challenges at the heart of the study abroad experience. From a theoretical standpoint, the paper interrogates some of the foundational secular assumptions upon which international development programmes in northern universities are based, while providing a brief introduction to the growing literature exploring the role of religion in development. From a practical perspective, the article emphasizes the pervasiveness and diversity of religious influence and then proceeds to highlight the communal and explanatory power of religion. In conclusion, some approaches are suggested that might better serve to prepare students for understanding the place of religion in many societies in the developing world.

*As the plane lands, twenty excited young students hope that their study abroad experience will be ‘life-changing’. They have found the money, got their shots, read the guidebook, and now all that awaits is the experience.*

*They emerge from the airport doors to be greeted by a wall of hot air and by the cheery bus driver, who thanks God for their safe arrival – and they soon realize why he brings God on board, and implores his help, as the bus negotiates daredevil drivers and bottomless potholes on some of the most dangerous roads in the world. On all sides they are surrounded by minibuses emblazoned with slogans such as ‘Praise God!’ or ‘Allah, the most merciful!’ in the company of the latest idols from the world of soccer. Keen development students notice that signboards reveal that this project is supported by a Church, or that school or health centre is an Islamic venture. Shop fronts also proclaim the owners’ faith. In terms of worship venues, there certainly are no shortages of churches or mosques.*

*The bus rolls into town, and to its destination, where a happy throng welcomes this latest bunch of students with a song. The tune sounds vaguely like it may have come out of a church, but even the more discerning are too tired by now to try to isolate some of the words. A speech of welcome follows – God is thanked again! – whereupon it is time to link up with their host families. Another prayer upon entry to their humble abodes – but they are getting used to this now.*

*Mealtime follows. One or two students are even asked to say 'grace' over the meal which can be disconcerting for those who have not prayed in a long time – if ever. The question: 'Are you saved, sister?' cannot now be evaded. In pride of place on the limited shelf of books is the Bible. A placard on the wall proclaims that 'Jesus is the unseen guest at every meal.'*

*Finally, to bed – accompanied by a final prayer for rest and safety. So ends a long day. They left their world only 24 hours ago, but it seems longer than that, and home seems a world away. The adrenaline still flows, but they are also bemused and confused and, if they care to admit it, not a little disoriented. By this time the students will already have come to an inescapable conclusion: this society is more openly religious than theirs.*

*Over the next weeks and months, this observation will be confirmed and their new way of life will become more familiar.*

*As they become used to the catchy tunes emanating from the radio, and begin humming many of them, they will realize that some words are familiar. Given an accent here or consonant there, they've heard them before. 'Jesu' is sprinkled liberally throughout, and by now know the local word for God, or church or mosque. In the Muslim enclaves, calls to prayer will define the day, give them bearings, and may even become a comforting part of their temporal furniture, while 'Inshallah' will become the most common expression around. On Friday or Sunday the day will be devoted to Allah or God, and to the longest services they have ever experienced or imagined.*

*At work at the NGO, students will have become used to the opening prayer at meetings, and a prayer does not go amiss at the health centre either. By now, some of the girls may have been reminded about the scriptural injunction confirming man's supremacy over woman. As for any homosexuals, the fires of hell await. This is indeed a different world.*

Yes, this is an exaggeration. But the events in this scenario have solid basis in fact. Anyone who has travelled much, especially in Africa, will recognize parts of the narrative. Sooner or later one will be asked the inevitable question (if in a Christian area) 'Are you saved?' (Yes, I have been asked this question at Immigration in one African country!) Not confined to the private realm, religion is no stranger to the public square in the Global South.

I have found religion to be an engrossing aspect of the whole study abroad experience. Sometimes the encounter has been amusing. On occasion, en route to Africa, I would utilize a stop-over in a Gulf country. Our flight arrived late at night, and I knew that at daybreak – not too many hours distant – the muezzin at full volume would encourage the faithful to prayer. On one occasion, a girl awoke in terror believing it was the fire alarm! But sometimes it can be menacing. What do you say when your student counterpart in a southern country questions your sanity, if you don't believe in God? What if you are regarded as an infidel – or worse? Clearly some preparation is advised, and students have urged me to prepare future participants for what to expect.

Such requests demand an answer to the question: where does religion fit in the study abroad experience? In the remainder of this article, I explore the theoretical and practical dimensions of this question. First, there is a need to understand why the aspect of religion has not featured more

prominently in the discourse surrounding international development. Why has such an obvious feature of southern life been sidelined, almost ignored? To conclude the paper, various practical ways of preparing students for the study abroad experience will be suggested. But first, let me add a few more examples to further illustrate the prevalence and influence of religion in the Global South, and the challenges and opportunities it may present in the study abroad context.

I share my experience as a teacher in the areas of religion and development, as well as a leader of study abroad programmes. My focus is on the developing world and I approach many of the examples from a development perspective, although I realize that many, if not most, students who travel abroad do so without a development studies background. I also admit to a bias towards Africa and a familiarity with Christianity, although many of the principles discussed are valid elsewhere in the Global South.

I remember well the first combined field trip with students from our partner university in Uganda to a national park. Inevitably, it seemed, the subject of discussion defaulted to religion: ‘Do you believe in God?’ a southern student asked a northern one. ‘No’ was the abrupt answer, immediately countered by ‘Why not?’ An awkward silence and an uneasy search for the next topic of conversation followed. Later, sitting around with a group of the same students, someone began reading an article in the local newspaper, which reported that ‘Night Dancers’ – magical beings who metamorphosed into leopards in the dead of night to terrorize the local inhabitants – had been identified in town. Snickers, chortling and laughter from the northerners was not reciprocated; in fact, the strange looks on the faces of the southern students betrayed their unease and an unwillingness to pursue the matter further. That was an off limits subject – better to stick to the sports pages. The approach to religion represented perhaps the biggest difference between the two sets of students who, aside from this area, could share common opinions on the latest music, sport, styles, and geopolitics. As time progressed, the northern students continued to be amazed at the active involvement of many of their southern counterparts in a vibrant student religious life.

Some countries have a unique religious heritage – Ethiopia is a prime example. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has had a long and dominant influence on society over the centuries, though Islam has been equally prominent in certain areas of the country. For some years, I have taken students to the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Lalibela. Touring the famous rock-hewn churches takes you back in time - hundreds of years. Such places encourage debate about the influence of religion on countries. But it is not just the theoretical that appeals. On the personal level, I found students intrigued by a particularly ‘mod’ or ‘hip’ guide, who surprised everyone by kissing the ornate crosses and genuflecting with genuine devotion at every turn.

Even beyond Lalibela, the influence of religion is pervasive. Trekking through the highlands of North Wollo it is impossible to ignore the status afforded the local priest. Every person would stop, even make a detour, to kiss his cross, reminding me of times in the Sahara when prayer breaks were as important as drinks breaks. Just as the desert clans never forget their connection to Mecca, so the Church in this area was clearly the centre, socially and spatially, of every community, as well as being the place most generously surrounded by trees, scarce in that environment.

The past may feel ever present for many in Ethiopia. Talking about the relation of Haile Selassie (the name means ‘the power of the Trinity’) to the Solomonic line, I am surprised when I get blank looks as the response to the question: ‘Who was Solomon?’ (Of course, it may not be

‘cool’ for the more religious students to divulge their religious knowledge to their secular colleagues.) In Ethiopia, where history is never far away, it may be important not to give the impression of ignorance.

Rwanda is another exceptional case. The 1994 genocide still has the power to shock, and few students are unaffected after a day spent visiting the genocide sites. Many issues of a religious nature arise, from the complicity of the church to individual strategies for survival. Tears are never far away when witnessing some of the reconciliation efforts by local NGOs. Sharing a meal together with perpetrators and victims becomes surreal. The students ask: ‘How can you forgive your children’s murderers?’ The answer is usually simple: ‘I can forgive, because of my faith.’ Later, that will provoke a storm of discussion.

While I have been fortunate to experience few incidences of crime during study abroad tours, there was one such incident provided an important learning opportunity. While staying in a remote and traditional area of Kenya, one of the students returned to her hut one night to find that her backpack containing passport, money, clothes, and camera had been stolen. No one had reported seeing the intruder, though his tracks could be clearly identified across the river. Upon hearing the news, the elders of the community came to the site to pronounce a curse on the criminal. The students were interested in this interesting anthropological tidbit, but the chance that the criminal would be apprehended was considered to be a long shot by many. In fact, most had forgotten the incident by the time we reached Nairobi, where we received a call explaining that the thief had given himself up, and the contents had been recovered. The curse had worked – very effectively – and a lesson was learned about the powers of another world.

Students travelling abroad need to be aware that religion may be viewed very differently in the Global South than in the secular academic environment of the North. A familiar aphorism, originally attributed to Jomo Kenyatta, has been recounted many times in the context of colonialism:

When the missionaries came to Africa, we had the land and they had the Bible. Then they said, ‘Let us pray...’, and asked us to close our eyes. By the time the prayer was over, they now had the land and we had the Bible.

Yet Desmond Tutu’s addendum may not be so familiar: ‘And we got the better deal!’ (Brown, 2004, p.7). This example illustrates the divide that often exists between northern and southern views of the world, illustrating a paradox that may not have received sufficient academic attention. That theoretical tension will be examined in the next section.

## **A. Religion and Development**

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Although matters of faith, religion and spirituality are central to the lives of millions of people in the global South, and many faith-based organizations are actively involved in development, few northern academics in the field of international development make explicit reference to religion’s role in development, and, if they do, the subject is often subsumed under another category, such as culture.

This paradox may reveal a generalization: the South – the targets or recipients of development – seems overwhelmingly religious, while the North – the purveyors of and practitioners of development – appears thoroughly secular. As in all generalizations, exceptions can be easily identified, for neither southern nor northern populations are homogenous: secular, liberal and materialistic elites exist in the South as do religious, conservative and marginalized communities in the North. But while religion may be a private and personal matter in the North, it is often a more open and obvious subject in the South.

For some years, researchers sensitive to religious issues and impacts have claimed that a distinct lacuna – a blind spot perhaps of considerable proportions – exists in the way that academics and other professionals involved in the world of development regard religion's role in development. As Katherine Marshall (2001), former Director and Counselor to the President of the World Bank on Values and Ethics, suggests:

The role of religious institutions, leaders, and programs in the development process is one of the more significant 'blind spots' in past development practice. These institutions, ideas, and perspectives have been too little understood, and their potential role in the complex kaleidoscope of development insufficiently explored. In many parts of the development business and in many religious programs and institutions, dialogue has resembled ships passing in the night. (p. 368)

This 'blind spot' may have translated into significant gaps in the pedagogical focus of academic programmes and in the research interests of university professors. Referring to spirituality as a 'development taboo', Kurt Alan Ver Beek (2000) declares that: 'the subject is conspicuously under-represented in the development discourse,' adding that: 'The result of this silence is a failure to explore and understand an integral aspect of how Southern people understand the world, make decisions, and take action' (p. 31). In a Special Issue of the journal *Development*, focusing on 'Religion and Development', Wendy Harcourt (2003) writes: 'The development community's broad commitment to social justice and social transformation to achieve a better world has traditionally excluded a belief in God, deities or spirituality, of any religious form, be it organized, community-based or individually held... Religion in this equation is ignored' (p. 3).

Ironically, in the search for understanding and pursuit of enlightenment, the northern university portrays itself as one of the few places where academic freedom allows spirited debate on controversial subjects: 'The university does not set itself up as an arbiter of truth, but as an arena within which contrary theories can be examined and can collide in open debate' (Ellerman, 2002, p. 286). Yet, in seeming to avoid debate on one of the most sensitive of subjects, it may be asked if the academy is in fact demonstrating an ideology, consistent with an observation by Karen Armstrong (2004): 'There is also a form of secular fundamentalism, which opposes all forms of faith as belligerently as religious fundamentalists attack secularism' (p. 40).

Thus, one way – indeed often the primary way – that millions of people make sense of their world is largely ignored in development studies, with the consequence that their innate self-esteem, derived from their belief systems and their world views, is brushed aside summarily, and dismissed as being of little consequence, or worse, as counterproductive. It may be argued that faith and religion are often perceived, as they have been throughout much of the history of development, as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. If religion was mentioned at all, it was viewed

in a negative rather than positive light, being identified as one of the determining factors in traditional life that held back progress to modernity. Religion is conspicuous by its absence in the modernization and dependency frameworks that dominated development discourse in the decades following the Second World War.

The seemingly irresistible forces of modernization had fuelled the assumption in northern academia that religion would inevitably give way to secularization. Surely the days of religion were numbered. Within the academy, the theory of secularization – ‘the only theory which was able to attain a truly paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences’ (Casanova, 1994, p. 17) – was accepted almost as an article of faith.

But this notion of secularization found itself increasingly challenged. Most notably, that doyen of sociologists of religion, Peter Berger (1999), recanted his earlier theoretical formulations: ‘My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever’ (p. 2). He went on to warn that: ‘Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril’ (p. 18).

Then came the events of September 11th, 2001. Religion, having been relegated, at least in the North, to the status of an epiphenomenon and consigned to the private realm, had resurfaced in the public square, demanding a public response. These events breathed new life into Samuel Huntington’s (1993) controversial ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis, inspiring a renewed increase of interest in religion’s influence on geopolitics. In light of the changed geo-political landscape, Philip Jenkins (2002a) foresaw that: ‘the twenty-first century will almost certainly be regarded by future historians as a century in which religion replaced ideology as the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs,’ (p. 54) and argued, in the context of the growth of Christianity in the South, that: ‘understanding the religion in its non-Western context is a prime necessity for anyone seeking to understand the emerging world’ (Jenkins, 2002b, p. 215). Since the ‘emerging world’ is the primary focus of International Development Studies (IDS) programmes, any lack in understanding such an important aspect of life for many people in the Global South represents a lacuna of considerable proportions.

Clearly, a space for religion in development has gradually opened up. From the idea of development as technocratic intervention, driven by science and embedded in modernity, the concept has become more culturally sensitive in the discursive streams variously described as ‘human development.’ As Amartya Sen (2000) has expressed it: ‘Cultural matters are integral parts of the lives we lead... efforts geared to development can hardly ignore the world of culture.’ These trends represent, at least in rhetoric, a significant shift in development theory and praxis. Development thinking, conceptualized in terms of catching up with the prosperous North and born of unparalleled optimism, has broadened to include a greater appreciation of what moves people and how they make sense of their world.

Trends toward a more holistic development have allowed greater opportunity for the inclusion of culture, and religion. For instance, the *Human Development Report 2004* recognized ‘the profound importance of religion to people’s identities’ (UNDP, 2004, p. 8), while the *Global Civil Society Report 2004/5* also pleaded for a more holistic understanding of southern life:

There is no way we can understand the logic, strategies and dynamics of civil society anywhere in the Third World unless we bring the transcendental dimension back into our analysis. Religious devotion is a fundamental motive for many social movements in the South, from Latin America to Africa and South Asia. (Anheier et al, 2004, p. 45)

In 2005, The Commission for Africa, under the chairmanship of Tony Blair, broke new ground by highlighting the potential of religion to affect development outcomes in its Report, *Our Common Interest*. Recognizing the growing importance of religious belief in Africa, while not ignoring its negative propensities, the Report views the continent ‘through African eyes’ and suggests that: ‘An appreciation of the role of religion in African life will require some fundamentally different approaches by the international community’ (p. 32). Such reports suggest a greater openness to include religion in global analysis.

Katherine Marshall’s (2001) original metaphor of ‘ships passing in the night’ (p. 368) might now be updated to describe the worlds of religion and development as ‘ships passing in the day’—visible to each other, but still with little or no communication between them, best kept at a distance. (Willis, 2005). More recently, Severine Deneulin (2009) has argued that the subject should be represented not in terms of religion *and* development, but rather religion *in* development, asserting that religion cannot be disentangled from life for many people in the world: ‘for religion constitutes a total way of life for religious believers and selective engagement is not an option’ (p. 26). She contends that religion is no longer an insignificant factor but an essential part of the development process, in fact, ‘religion may define the very ends and means of the development process itself’ (Deneulin, 2009, p. 8).

While there is certainly a greater openness to the role of religion in development, terrorism may now have replaced tradition as development’s ‘bête noire.’ Religion is still often considered an obstacle to development in popular perception, at least in the North where rational and secular epistemological frameworks may be viewed as superior to the superstitious and fundamental, with the consequence that the potential of faith, spirituality, and religion are often undervalued in the development imperative.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise when students, schooled in secularity, often find themselves underprepared for life in communities where religious practice and spiritual world view may be widespread and privileged. This may well be one of the areas where students find themselves most disoriented, and may represent one of the more challenging areas at the heart of the study abroad experience. So, considering these limitations, how best can students prepare for the study abroad experience?

## **B. Pedagogical Implications**

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the eminent Harvard Professor of Comparative Religion, used to recount that he began his introductory class, (which he considered his most important religion class), with the sentence: ‘We human beings on earth have been religious now for a very long time, and in a great variety of ways’ (Smith, 1990, p. 180). In this way, Smith provides an invaluable starting point for anyone wishing to prepare the student for an understanding of the religious influences they may experience when they travel abroad.

As his course continued, Smith (1962) posed questions, which, though articulated half a century ago, are still relevant today: ‘The two most fundamental questions confronting twentieth-century man, the one social, the other personal, both involve religion: how to turn our nascent world society into a world community, on a group level; and on a personal level, how to find meaning in modern life’ (p. 8). Travelling students may find both questions central to their purpose abroad, as they seek to expand both their global and personal horizons.

Smith’s insights provide a framework for considering the pedagogical responsibility. In his introductory statement, he underlines the pervasiveness and diversity of religious influence and then goes on to highlight the communal and explanatory power of religion. I consider each of those areas, which will be emphasized in turn, to be important in regard to preparing the student for the study abroad experience. In conclusion, some practical pedagogical ideas will be suggested, and, finally, some comments regarding religion and its intersection with development in the developing world will be shared.

### *Pervasiveness*

So what do students need to know before they leave? In addition to all the usual advice about the logistics of travel and culture, finances and security, students need to be introduced to the question of religion. Some understanding of how religion impacts the area to be visited may well enhance the study abroad experience. At least they need to mentally prepare for the reality that religion may play a greater role in their new environment than in their home country – in effect, acknowledging ‘the elephant in the room’, rather than ignoring it.

Religion is an ever-present factor, even – perhaps especially – in the poorest areas. Rory Stewart (2004) describes a walk across Afghanistan shortly after the ouster of the Taliban in *The Places In Between*, graphically depicting the primitive and backward conditions he encountered, concluding that ‘...the only piece of foreign technology was a Kalashnikov, and the only global brand was Islam’ (p. xii). In Nairobi, I have been told by slum dwellers that ‘there are more churches than latrines here,’ and, in the obvious absence of the latter, and the evident presence of the former, I have no trouble believing the statement. While these examples may be exceptional, students are likely to notice that religion in the developing world is more prominent than in their home country. Gerrie ter Haar (2009) begins her book entitled, *How God Became African*, by noting: ‘It can hardly escape anyone travelling in Africa that religious belief and practice are a normal part of the social fabric in most communities’ (p. 1).

While the northern academy may assume a secular, even agnostic, neutrality, theologian John Mbiti (1989) declares: ‘in traditional life there are no atheists’ (p. 29). The nature of that belief may be unfamiliar as well, for in an African world, the world of spirits may feature large. According to Richard Dowden (2008), ‘belief in God and the world of spirits is universal and powerful in Africa’ (p. 312). He continues: ‘I am frequently struck by the immediacy and directness of the power of spirits in Africa’ (p. 315). Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004) suggest that the most effective definition of religion, in respect to Africa, might be: ‘...a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate, from the visible one that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world’ (p. 14).

Students may be entering a very different environment, not just geographically, but mentally. Traditional worlds are often religious places (Bruce, 1996, p. 25). And, although Dowden (2008) may be guilty of a generalization, his description rings true for many: ‘Africa never went through the philosophical and social revolution of Europe in the eighteenth century which sought scientific explanations for the world and put science and spirit in separate boxes... In Africa body and soul are one and the soul lives on’ (p. 313). As many a student has recognized, living in a rural village may challenge one’s mental certitudes, as Richard Critchfield describes: ‘To live in villages, even temporarily, is to suspend one’s disbelief in the supernatural; indeed, seemingly supernatural occurrences are part of everyday life’ (as cited in Sherman, 1997, p. 3).

Entering this unfamiliar world, they also may not be aware of the biases they bring with them. Many may consider that they are neutral with respect to belief, yet, in a predominantly religious society, secularity is not the norm and may not easily assume a ‘neutral’ label. While students may consider that they are neutral, this will not always be the way their words and actions are perceived. Secularity has many parallels with religiosity, and some variations of secularity can be as ideologically fundamental in nature as their religious counterparts.

The famous anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1956), in his pioneering research amongst ethnic groups in the Sudan, recognized that: ‘...in a study of religion, if we wish to seize the essential nature of what we are inquiring into, we have to try to examine the matter from the inside also, to see it as the Nuer see it’ (pp. 121-22). Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), building on Evans-Pritchard’s earlier landmark work, proffers this advice: ‘The student’s first responsibility is to recognize that there is always and in principle more in any man’s faith than any other man can see’ (p. 141) While many aspects of local belief systems may appear strange to the student observer, everything makes sense in the believer’s cosmology – even the strange antics of the witchdoctor, reordering the world, as he gathers up bones, shards and trinkets that have been scattered far and wide. Another concept of Smith’s may be helpful. He had little patience with the common tendency to reify the term ‘religion’ itself, preferring to experience religion relationally and personally: ‘For fundamentally one has to do not with religions, but with religious persons’ (p. 153). Such an insight may be helpful as the student grapples to understand the motivations of their local companions, influenced often by both traditional and imported belief systems. Respect and patience are paramount, as students come to appreciate that religion is not mere superstition but rather ‘the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant’ (Berger, 1967, p. 28).

## *Diversity*

In his sweeping book about the continent, Africa: *Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, Dowden (2008) suggests that there are five exceptions to every rule:

Every time you say ‘Africa is...’ the words crumble and break. From every generalization you must exclude at least five countries. And just as you think you have nailed down a certainty, a defining characteristic, you find the opposite is true in other places. Africa is full of surprises. (p. 10)

Dowden might have well been talking about religion, for there may also be at least five exceptions to every stereotypical interpretation of each world religion. These mono-dimensional

interpretations of the great faiths may be popular, but a more textured picture of religious diversity is required, acknowledging the broad variations in religious perspectives, and the myriad ways that faith and spirituality intersect in ordinary people's lives.

One of the biggest potential mistakes students might make when embarking on international assignments is to imagine that Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism are monolithic. Islam, for instance, is not the same everywhere. The pedagogical imperative must be to get beyond the stereotypes. While students, as a result of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, may be aware of the Shia and Sunni divisions of Islam, they are often ignorant of the many other localized strands of the religion. As Edward Said (2002) has suggested, perhaps the use of the term 'Islams' would be more appropriate.

Christianity is also not monolithic. All variants of Christianity – from conservative to liberal, from catholic to evangelical, from socially engaged to cultic and exclusivist – may be represented within a larger town or city. And while it may not be possible to predict with any certainty the dominant variant the student is going to be exposed to, some familiarity with the basic tenets of the religion will, of course, be helpful.

While noting that the epicenter of Christianity moves ever southward, Philip Jenkins (2006) explains how ancient Biblical and modern African viewpoints are often similar, with the consequence that aspects of the first century Biblical world may resonate with contemporary Africans more than they do with Europeans or North Americans. While stories of spirit possession, healing and miracles may be passé in the northern world, even in the northern church, such beliefs are often alive and well in the Global South. Also, the distinction between nominal adherent and practicing believer exists everywhere.

The expectations of the receiving population should be considered too. Often they may be expecting Christian visitors – after all, America, Canada and Britain are considered as Christian countries. The assumption of a Christian background does not take into account a growing Biblical illiteracy amongst young people in the developed world. The stories that sustain many Africans, such as the parting of the Red Sea or the trials of Job or Jonah, and parables, like the 'Good Samaritan' or the 'Prodigal Son', immediately recognizable in the past, may have become less iconic in the developed world. On a continent like Africa, where religious instruction is often still examinable in school, and where madrassas espouse an obviously Quranic curriculum, the average northerner may come across as profoundly ignorant of the faith texts on the one hand, and an apologist for secular proselytism on the other.

Obviously one hopes that any advice proffered by the organizing faculty regarding the religious background of an area to be visited will be sufficiently context specific, although it may also be useful to discuss the sweeping trends of religious history. For instance, I have been surprised to have students express ignorance of David Livingstone in the context of southern Africa. Many may not realize that Jesus – or Isa – is recognized as a prophet in Islam.

Ali Mazrui (1986) has suggested that an understanding of the religious context is essential in understanding the context of Africa, where he suggests that: 'Three visions of God seek to capture the soul of a continent' (p.157). Ter Haar (2009) enlarges on Mazrui's observation: 'Africa houses an enormous diversity of religious tendencies, from traditional and neo-traditional movements to

imported religions such as Christianity and Islam in all their rich diversity' (p. viii). With respect to those imported religions, Mbiti (1989) observes that: '...in their encounter with traditional religions, Christianity and Islam have made only an astonishingly shallow penetration in converting the whole man of Africa' (p. 257) – a point that will be readily appreciated in the context of Latin America too. And how can one hope to grasp the history of the latter continent without an understanding of the role of the Catholic Church over the centuries, together with the emergence of Liberation Theology and the dynamics of the more recent evangelical surge?

Some countries can be hard to understand without some appreciation of the complexity of their religious backgrounds. Take Uganda for example. It may be hard to grasp some of the undercurrents in the nation's history without some knowledge of its religious antecedents. Following the long history of kingdoms, when traditional beliefs held sway, Swahili traders brought Islam while Protestant and Catholic missionaries introduced Christianity in the late nineteenth century. The country today is predominantly Christian, divided between Catholic and Protestant, with a sizeable Muslim minority. Each of these persuasions has played a significant role at various times in Uganda's history. In the last decades, the insurgency in the North has focused attention on the Lord's Resistance Army, which has preached a bizarre mix of Christian and animist beliefs in the context of a brutal insurgency.

Although dominant in much of northern Africa, Islam is hardly monolithic throughout the continent. To think that Africa is populated by Muslim extremists is to miss the wide multiplicity of Islamic options available there. While Wahabi influence in the Horn may alarm western powers, the free and mystical Sufis are seldom a threat to anyone, except doctrinaire theologians. In Senegal, for instance, secular state and Muslim tradition have coexisted well together, but Muslim influence is far from monolithic – four main Sufi brotherhoods are divided into further diverse groups, each with particular interests.

Fixed assumptions, therefore, may well be misleading. One Canadian student recalls, on being assigned an internship in Thailand, that she prepared herself by learning about Buddhism, only to be surprised upon arrival to find herself working in a Christian orphanage!

## *Community*

The demands of a communal lifestyle may well be one of the most challenging adjustments that the student abroad has to negotiate. Having to curb individualistic impulses in order to fit in with the communal rhythms of local life, may be frustrating but also serve to illustrate a basic difference in values and world views between North and South. Whether the students fit into community life or not may make the difference between the overall success or failure of the study abroad experience.

Desmond Tutu is an infectious advocate of 'Africa's gift to the world' - *ubuntu* (<http://www.tutufoundationuk.org/ubuntu.html>). Encapsulated in the saying: 'I am because we are', *ubuntu* is a philosophy that affirms human beings through other human beings and may lie at the heart of much southern life. Belonging may be the reason for the often rapid growth of the urban congregation, where church or mosque may replace the old allegiances of family and friends from the rural world.

An invitation for the visiting student to attend worship may well be forthcoming, and may be well worth accepting (although the student may need to be firm in outlining that they may not take up the invite every week, or at every opportunity). Such invites may provide an unparalleled opportunity for acceptance into a local community (although the student should always be prepared to say a few words if called upon) and provide a wonderful insight into how local people think (largely ignored in development texts and classes back home).

Various issues of a cultural or religious nature are sure to come up. No one wants to offend, so the student needs to try to figure out the 'do's and don'ts' of a specific culture, whether religiously based or not. Conservative conventions around dress codes are often understood; hopefully dietary restrictions are too. Restrictions around gender roles are often more troubling to the female students and potentially more divisive. Clearly, both Jesus and Mohammed were more liberal in their attitudes to women than many of their followers have been.

Many young people will be asked why they are not yet married, and, of course, should be prepared for various marriage proposals (but that is another story!). The question of children may be viewed very differently in the South; traditionally, barrenness has been considered a disgrace. Upon arrival at their destination, it may soon become obvious where the host community stands in terms of various issues, including the contentious area of sexuality. Students may well be shocked at the degree of homophobia they encounter. In many parts of the Global South, there may be a visceral opposition to homosexual practices (which are often proscribed by law), while the spectacle of conservative American bishops being ordained by Africans have dramatically illustrated the divisions over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion.

The student should be careful with assumptions regarding doctrinal issues – for instance, I have often heard students say that contraception is 'against Christianity'. While the Roman Catholic Church has openly declared its opposition to artificial methods of birth control, many churches hold no opinion on the subject, or actively encourage their use for the spacing of families. With regards to female genital cutting (FGC) though, many churches voice their opposition, and some even provide an opportunity for young girls to participate in an alternative rite of passage (ARP) that honours the cultural milestone of circumcision.

Surely there will be much for the student to absorb and learn with regard to communal life. If students can approach any restrictions patiently and positively, they may find unexpected opportunities for learning and insight. For instance, while Ramadan may be a challenge, the accompanying sense of festivity may overwhelm insecurity, as a spirit of celebration becomes infectious. Funerals may be elaborate affairs and bring the whole community together. Dowden (2008) considers how Westerners have devalued African traditional belief systems and concludes: '... their symbolism expresses the meaning of fundamentals such as the family, personal responsibility and death ... the very areas that we in the West cannot deal with' (p. 550). Respect, therefore, remains paramount.

### *The Search for Meaning*

All religious traditions suggest that there is more to life than meets the eye, and thus often come into conflict with rational Western mindsets that eschew such metaphysical enquiry. The principle of karma is foundational in large areas of the world. Concepts of reincarnation and

resurrection resonate with billions of people. For many, faith is the main resource in making sense of life and death. In an environment where death is ever present, whether from conflict, AIDS or the ubiquitous consequences of poverty, answers cannot be merely theoretical or theological. While death may be the last taboo in the North, it must often be confronted with vital immediacy in the South. Peter Berger (1969) maintains that: 'The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk it, inevitably, toward it' (p. 52). For many in the majority world, religion's appeal exists in holding the answers to the big questions. While development is all about this life, the faiths, in focusing also on the next, may preach the ultimate iteration of 'development as freedom' (Sen, 1999) – freedom from death itself.

Students may need to be encouraged to reflect on the similarities and differences between earlier incursions in the name of Christianity and development today. Seemingly poles apart, the philosophical underpinnings of religion and development may be closer than is generally acknowledged, the secular focus in academic enquiry disguising the intrinsically religious nature of the development initiative itself. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2001) claims that developmentalism may be regarded as 'a secularized version of the Christian perspective' (p. 25), while Gilbert Rist (1990) goes further to posit that development is the 'new religion of the West.' Karl Marx (1977) earlier recognized the tension, expressed also in his personal struggle for daily survival, between academic theory and actual practice: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (p. 158). Arguably, IDS programmes in Canada attract the 'brightest, most idealistic and socially committed' students – young people who are becoming aware of the injustice and inequity in the world and who wish to change it. In an earlier age, such altruistic young people might have gone to seminary and come out as missionaries, while today, as development practitioners, their mission may be to make a difference in the world, while bringing secular salvation to the materially poor.

In the process, perhaps bigger questions are raised, not just about development, but about the meaning of life itself. Such existential questions may be inspired by seeing the resilience and fortitude of the materially poor and their apparent – often counter-intuitive in the circumstances – happiness. In such an environment, is it any wonder that thoughts about the meaning of life surface, with questions occasionally being asked of supposedly superior northern lifestyles? Might religion speak to a missing ingredient in the majority world, 'the God-shaped hole', that Blaise Pascal referred to (1966, p. 75)?

This article has deliberately focused on students from secular institutions, but it might be interesting to consider another category of northern student: missiology students from religious institutions. Mission trips are growing in popularity, and arguably such students are better prepared to consider and interpret the religious milieu in which they find themselves. Some cooperation between these two philosophical solitudes might be encouraged, for missionaries have sometimes been considered to have some advantages over secular development workers, often being more permanent and therefore more culturally and linguistically attuned to their surroundings. There may be much that secular development programmes can learn from their faith-based counterparts, and vice versa.

## *Pedagogical Suggestions*

Comparative Religion classes can be invaluable in providing an overall background, though they may not alert the student going abroad to all of the local religious variations that can be encountered. Even the religious student may be unfamiliar with the particular ‘brand’ of their own faith they may encounter in the field. Anthropological perspectives have long shed light on the practice of belief. Henrietta Moore (2009) has helpfully called attention to the epistemological and ethical dilemmas involved in making sense of alternative world views (p. 207). For those without access to such academic resources, any research in advance will be helpful. Guide books may well begin the process, but more comprehensive and innovative ways of learning about the religious context of the destination country are to be encouraged.

While students can be encouraged to gain a basic knowledge of the prevalent religious texts, they should also be cautioned against expecting to find a ‘text-book’ version of any religion upon arrival. In the age of the Internet, it is possible to access media from many countries of the world, and thus gain a sense of what can be expected. Another way, often underutilized, is to take advantage of the multicultural and international make-up of our modern institutions of learning. An hour’s chat over coffee with a student from the destination country may be one of the best preparatory exercises for a sojourn abroad (though a caution may be in order here, for such expatriate students, coming from more elitist sectors within society, may not represent populations where poverty is the norm).

A novel may be an excellent point of entry for a discussion about religion and development. As examples, the quintessential classic of African literature, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), may have passed its 50th anniversary, but still introduces subjects that have great relevance to modern Nigeria, and indeed Africa. Much of Ben Okri’s literary output, such as his trilogy, *The Famished Road* (1992), is informed by echoes of another world, integrating the worlds of flesh and spirit, and allowing a vision of development that goes far beyond the usual one-dimensional view of African life. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) might provide an excellent introduction for a group visiting India, with its treatment of a plethora of development issues, including some of a religious nature.

Movies too can inspire some lively conversations. Even popular hits, like *Slumdog Millionaire*, can provoke interesting discussions about the values and lifestyles of the poor. *The Mission* comes to mind in light of the colonial and Christian incursion into Latin America. Although sometimes difficult to access, local movies may provide distinctive pictures of societies, and contain many subjects for discussion. Spirits, demons and witches populate a genre emanating from Nollywood, the booming Nigerian film industry, now the second biggest film producer in the world after Bollywood. (UNESCO, 2009) Such local offerings can lure the student away from their usual dependence on Western sources, and open their minds to other worldviews.

Students have initiated discussion amongst themselves on past trips around the ethical implications of answers to the common questions: ‘Do you believe in God?’ or ‘Are you saved?’ While united in not wishing to cause offence, students may not be unanimous as to where their ethical responsibilities lie in respect to being more or less economical with the truth. Will an honest admission irreparably damage an important relationship? What to do about the inevitable invitation

to church? Some light-hearted role playing among the students may be of help in such preparatory simulations.

### **Post Script: A Life-Changing Experience?**

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In attempting to encourage the student travelling abroad to take the aspect of faith seriously, I may be accused of having presented an overly positive view of religion in this paper. I consider this necessary in order to counter some of the negativity with which the subject is often approached in the northern academy. However, it must be stressed that religion is not always a force for good. Of course it can foment division, demonize 'the other' and lead to conflict, and, on occasion, war. Hopefully, the student's experience abroad will allow them to be better informed regarding this aspect of life and to be more discerning of religion in all of its benign and malignant potential.

While it is hard to escape the popular perception, at least in the North, of religion's identification with conflict and terrorism, students should also be encouraged to consider the potential strengths of religion, for, as Huston Smith (1991) has pointed out, the religious traditions represent the 'winnowed wisdom of the human race' (p. 5). Wilfred Cantwell Smith concluded the last of his introductory lectures with some advice to his students: 'I'm not saying that religion is a good thing. I'm saying that it's a great thing. It can make you better or it can make you much worse. But it means that you take the question of how to live seriously' (as cited in *Harvard University Gazette*, 2001). In that respect, the study abroad experience can well be a life-changing experience!

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