

## Article

# Religious Education in Secularist Kindergartens? Pedagogical Leaders on Religion in Norwegian ECEC

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**Abstract:** According to the legal framework, religion forms a certain part of Norwegian early childhood education in publicly owned kindergartens. As the only Scandinavian country where this is the case, the object clause (statement of purpose) for Norwegian kindergartens defines basic values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition as the value foundation for the institution. In this article we explore the impact of the processes of secularization and pluralization on the pedagogical content of early childhood education, and how some pedagogical leaders understand the religious elements. Empirically, the article is partly based on qualitative interviews targeting seven public kindergartens in the counties of Oslo and Agder, and partly on interpretations of their planning documents, of which many are publicly available. The pedagogical staff express loyalty to the legal framework regulating early childhood education but seem to be more concerned with religious diversity and religious minorities than with majority religion and religion as an expression of Christian heritage and traditions.

**Keywords:** religious education; minorities; kindergartens; secularism; early childhood education; Christian heritage and tradition



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## 1. Introduction

This article explores reflections of the transmission of religious tradition in kindergartens based on the following research question: How do pedagogical leaders in a sample of public Norwegian kindergartens interpret the religious aspects of the legal framework, and how do they reflect upon their own implementation of it? The aim of the article is to expand knowledge about religion in Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) partly by interviewing pedagogically responsible staff in selected kindergartens owned by the local municipality or the state, and partly by interpreting planning documents and legal documents such as The Kindergarten Act and The Framework Plan for Kindergartens in Norway.

Like the other Nordic countries, Norway has undergone a secularization process particularly since the end of World War Two. In addition to this, increasing immigration has transformed the country into a religiously complex society (cf. [Furseth 2017](#)). A large majority of the 5.3 million Norwegian citizens, i.e., approximately 69 percent, still belong to the Church of Norway, a state church until 2012. According to Statistics Norway, ca. 700,000 inhabitants, or 13 percent of the population, are members of religious communities or life stance communities outside the Church of Norway. Approximately half of these belong to other Christian churches or congregations, while the other half belong to other religious communities or life stance communities. The rest, 18 percent, are not members of religious communities ([Statistics Norway 2020](#)).

## 2. The Legal Basis for Norwegian ECEC

In 2020, more than 92 percent of all Norwegian children between 1 and 5 years of age attended one of the country's 5730 kindergartens. This makes kindergartens important institutions for social integration. Contrary to early childhood education in Denmark and Sweden, Norwegian ECEC has an object clause (statement of purpose) explicitly stating that it is founded on basic values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions ([The Kindergarten Act 2005](#), § 1). In addition, and still in contrast to neighboring Scandinavian countries, all Norwegian kindergartens are committed to conveying a "field of training" called Ethics, Religion and Philosophy (ERP). Norwegian kindergartens thus appear to be an exception in Scandinavia when it comes to conveying religion to young children by introducing a "national curriculum" for it. However, the current object clause reflects widely accepted values and traditions in Norway as well as the pluralist and secular societal development ([Hovdelien 2013](#)). The object clause was also intended to meet international human rights claims and to avoid religious discrimination. In terms of values, Norwegian ECEC is now "built on basic values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and the nature, intellectual freedom, compassion, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that are expressed in different religions and world views, and that are anchored in Human Rights" ([The Kindergarten Act § 1 a](#)). The parent mandate is determined at the beginning of the same paragraph. No kindergarten may omit the abovementioned values. According to the legal framework, religious tradition transmission is therefore an integral but limited part of Norwegian ECEC. A specific learning outcome on religion is formalized, and early childhood education as such is, among others, founded on values from the "Christian and humanist heritage and tradition" ([The Kindergarten Act, § 1](#); the [Framework Plan 2017](#), pp. 54–55). The current framework plan from 2010 has retained ERP as a field of "training", with eleven formulations on learning outcomes (the [Framework Plan 2017](#), pp. 54–55). Compared with the original prescription, the religious topics are now less specific and more pluralistically oriented, and the general ethical parts are expanded. Two of the eleven formulations on learning outcomes are particularly important for this study, and we asked our informants specifically about how they understood and implemented them. The first states that "the children are to be given knowledge of core values in Christian and humanist heritage and tradition and become familiar with religions and worldviews that are represented in the [actual] kindergarten". According to the second, the staff are to "give the children knowledge of and mark anniversaries, religious festivals and traditions in the Christian cultural heritage and in other religions and worldviews that are present in the [actual] kindergarten".

## 3. Theoretical Concepts

Taylor (2007) distinguishes, including theories about secularism, and theories about multiculturalism as a normative response to growing pluralization and multiculturalism, is in our view an expedient theoretical tool for interpreting the empirical material and the religious context of present-day Norwegian ECEC. [Berger \(1990, p. 95\)](#) understood secularization as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols". The educational system is a sector in which religious and ecclesiastical authority has dwindled, and universities, schools and kindergartens are core examples of this kind of secularization.

Taylor (2007) distinguishes between three senses of secularity. Secularity 1 refers to the gradual expulsion of religion from public life, in line with Berger's definition. Norwegian kindergartens have gradually become more secular in this sense, and the religious elements have been reduced in the legal framework since the turn of the millennium. In Secularity 2 secularity is linked to an alleged decline in religious belief and practice on an individual level. This affects the kindergartens because both parents and staff are statistically less religious than before. On the one hand, the strong parents' mandate prescribed by Norwegian legislation may lead to a more secular kindergarten; on the other hand, a more secular staff may influence the kindergarten through their own secularity. They may be uninterested in,

opposed to, or indifferent to religion in ways that to some extent affect their professional work. Secularity 3 is Taylor's primary interest and perhaps the most original theoretical contribution: The historical process has reached a point where religious belief has become an individual choice for ordinary people, and not only for an intellectual elite. This may also affect kindergartens, where religion could be regarded as a difficult and tense topic, difficult to "embrace" because of great differences in worldviews. The empirical diversity in religious and cultural issues in the Western societies of today is a common experience that, according to Taylor, leads to a realization of the need for common values after all.

Casanova has developed a concept of secularization that may supplement Taylor's concepts. In Casanova's terms "secular" refers to "self-contained secularity", understood as an experience of living without religion as the normal, almost natural, state where people are generally irreligious (Casanova 2013, p. 30). This state can be regarded as an endpoint of the secularization process. Some of our informants reflect this kind of secularization, but the legal framework thematizes religion and states that there is to be "room for a spiritual dimension" in ECE, a "dimension" that must be used as a basis for dialogue and respect for diversity (the Framework Plan 2017, p. 9). This statement points in the direction of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism describes the way a given society deals with cultural diversity and can be understood as "the political accommodation by the state and/or a dominant group of all minority cultures defined first and foremost by reference to race, ethnicity or religion, and additionally but more controversially by reference to other group-defining characteristics such as nationality and aboriginality." (Triandafyllidou et al. 2012, p. 5). The concept is based on an underlying and normative assumption that people of different religious or cultural backgrounds can coexist peacefully, and that society is enriched by preserving, respecting, and even encouraging, such diversity. Proponents of multiculturalism as a normative response to cultural and religious diversity in modern societies such as Norway defend diversity and represent it as a natural part of the public sphere, public kindergartens included. Multiculturalism is not in conflict with Taylor's Secularity 3, which takes individual and societal diversity for granted, but calls for common values. Casanova's "self-contained secularity", in which living without religion is the normal or natural state, is less compatible with multiculturalism.

#### 4. Relevant Research on Religion in ECEC

In the 'Nordic model', education, training and care form an integrated part of ECEC (Karila 2012). The State plays a significant role in providing universal welfare services, and ECEC is seen as an important part of this (cf. Thoresen 2006; Thoresen and Winje 2017, pp. 19–48). Thus, the most relevant previous research for this study is religion in ECEC in the Nordic countries. For an overview of international research on religion in ECEC, see The Routledge International Handbook of the Place of Religion in Early Childhood Education and Care (Kuusisto, forthcoming).

Parts of the anthology Migration, Religion and Early Childhood Education are also relevant (Aslan 2020). Here Sturla Sagberg presents and discusses the Norwegian model of religion in ECEC and its legal framework. The article is normative, strongly advocating making religion and religious culture visible in kindergartens and developing literacy competence on existential issues, religion and values (Sagberg 2020). Liam Gearon and Arniika Kuusisto discuss the Finnish model for handling religion in ECEC, with its systems of intercultural understanding. They argue for developing "religious and worldview sensitivity" (Gearon and Kuusisto 2020). Kuusisto has also studied responses to traditional Christian festivities in Finnish kindergartens (Kuusisto 2011). Together with Silja Lamminmäki-Vartia, she studied kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards religious diversity. They found a lot of uncertainty on how—or if at all—education on religions and worldviews should be implemented in a multicultural, multi-faith context (Kuusisto and Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012).

In Sweden a central research focus has been on questions related to Christian and Swedish heritage and tradition in ECEC (Puskás and Andersson 2017, 2018, 2019; Reimers 2020, 2021).

Eva Reimers discusses whether staff in Swedish kindergartens have a narrow understanding of the concept of religion, and how this may characterize their work with religion as an aspect of cultural heritage. She concludes that kindergartens “do not need to refrain from marking religious holidays in order to be non-confessional. Quite the opposite . . .” (Reimers 2020, p. 283).

Some recent Norwegian empirical studies are also of relevance (cf. Hovdelien 2018, pp. 294–97). In the article “The multicultural and multi-religious Norwegian kindergarten”, Kari Krogstad shows that there is little coherence between the ideals of the state documents and the practical day to day activities in the kindergartens (Krogstad 2016, 2017). Audun Toft and Kristine Toft Rosland studied religious festivals in a sample of kindergartens and found that religious festivals other than those of Christians were not given attention (Toft and Rosland 2014). Krogstad also studied culturally diverse kindergartens alone and together with Kari-Mette W. Hidle (Krogstad and Hidle 2015; Krogstad 2014, 2016, 2017; see also Iversen and Krogstad 2020). A common important finding in these studies is that dissemination of information about religions other than Christianity was neglected in the pedagogical practice in the public kindergartens studied. Olav Hovdelien and Helje Kringlebotn Sødal arrived at a somewhat more nuanced conclusion in a qualitative study (Hovdelien and Sødal 2021; cf. Sødal and Hovdelien 2020): local variations were found, but dissemination about religious topics tended to be neglected.

## 5. This Empirical Inquiry

This study has a descriptive aim and is based on an approach that is scientifically and theoretically rooted in the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (1993). The main empirical basis is seven semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour conducted between October 2019 and January 2020. Formal documents are also a part of the empirical material (cf. the following page). Based on our previous understanding of the research field, the sample was strategically selected in order for different kinds of kindergartens and social contexts to be represented in the material. Four of the kindergartens are located in the county of Agder, while the remaining three are in the Oslo region. There are regional differences related to religion in Norway. Agder traditionally constitutes the heartland of the Norwegian “Bible belt”. Oslo is both the most religiously diverse and the most secular part of the country. This, and the fact that the Norwegian religious landscape has changed in the last decades and has become more complex (cf. Furseth 2017, pp. 291–312), is a part of our pre-understanding as researchers. As university staff, we have between 15 and 20 years of teaching experience in these regions. The kindergartens were chosen to reflect some of the diversity in the regions, and we mainly chose kindergartens with cultural and religious diversity among the children to investigate how traditions from different religions were dealt with. All the informants were females with an educational responsibility as either manager (styrer), department manager (avdelingsleder) or pedagogical leader (pedagogisk leder).

The informants as well as the kindergartens were anonymized, and the following codes were used: O1 is situated in one of the eastern suburbs outside Oslo. The informant was in her forties. O2 is situated in the western part of the city, with an informant in her fifties. O3 is in the eastern part, with an informant in her twenties. A1 is situated in the downtown area of the second largest city in Agder, with the informant in her sixties. A2 is situated in the eastern part of Kristiansand, the largest town in this county, with the informant in her fifties. A3 is in the downtown area of the same city, with the two informants in their late thirties. A4 is situated in a village east of Kristiansand with an informant in her forties. Except for O3, all informants have many years of experience as pedagogical leaders. The sample was too small to enable extensive comparisons between the regions, and we focused mainly on similarities and differences within the material (cf. Bryman 2004, pp. 284–85). The interview guide was constructed in order to obtain varied information about religion in the kindergartens, focusing partly on the informants’ personal understanding and interpretation of and attitudes towards the religious aspect

in the legal framework. It was also designed to convey the informants' reflections on the actual work with religious instruction, such as frequency of thematization, methods used and parental cooperation.

We analyzed the documents as part of the empirical material, and they can be divided in two groups: publicly available planning documents and documents received from the kindergartens. The latter are mainly planning documents (biannual plans, etc.) for the educational work. These documents contribute to a broader understanding of the interviews because they are based on local interpretations of the national framework.

## 6. Empirical Findings

We wanted to conduct a content analysis of the empirical material based on our hermeneutical pre-understanding of the concrete issues concerning religion and values at stake in this field. In semi-structured interviews it is important to have an open interview guide and to let the informants present as freely as possible what they understand as important issues. In structuring the empirical analyses (and the interview guide), we followed the formal hierarchy in the legal framework: first the relevant paragraphs in the Kindergarten Act, and secondly the relevant learning outcomes from the Kindergarten Framework Plan. A similar structure dominates Norwegian research in the field.

### *Reflections on the Object Clause*

Most of the informants expressed awareness of the importance of the object clause, but in different ways. Two extremities were found: One informant, A1, reported that the object clause was "often" discussed and reflected upon, while O2 implied that it was hardly used by admitting that she was "not so familiar with it" and was more concerned with the Framework Plan. The other informants seemed to be in between these two positions, which we interpreted as "many times during a semester" and "hardly ever". The object clause is probably most discussed when/if some of its values are contested, for instance equality between the sexes, and in connection with designing annual plans.

The informants generally stressed the ethical aspects of the object clause. They were concerned with its "common" values and their importance in an increasingly culturally diverse society. Reflections on Christian heritage and tradition in general and on the Christian foundation of the values were more in the background. Arguments on respect and inclusion were at the forefront. Some of the informants reported that the dissemination of values was often adjusted to the children enrolled in the kindergarten and their families. The informant in O3, who works in a highly diverse kindergarten with many immigrants, linked the object clause to conveying prevailing social values, implied to develop social competence and facilitate inclusion: "We are cultural preservers (kulturbærere). To many immigrants we are the first integrating organization that they meet when arriving in this country. This means that we have a responsibility to convey our values to children and parents alike." She understood the values specified in the object clause as humanist or "common" values rather than Christian values, which she found important primarily in an historical sense.

When asked about the central values of the object clause, the informant in A3 mainly spoke about respect for each child and parent: "We must respect every family. We are a 'downtown' kindergarten with great diversity, and cooperation with the parents is especially important". When elaborating on this, she linked the specific values in the object clause to "ordinary values like being kind [...] love and equality". The informant in A1 also talked about "respect" and "inclusion" and stressed that this must be conveyed independently of religious affiliation: "I have always been concerned that everyone should experience being included. The children ought to experience that we respect what the parents stand for." The informant in A4 mentioned developing social competence and building relations combined with the ability to communicate first when commenting on the importance of the object clause. To her this was a foundation for all care and training in the kindergartens.

No informant problematized the concept of “common values”, and they hardly focused on conflicts and debated aspects of the value foundation of the institution. Instead, they talked about similarities without using the adjective Christian from the object clause. Only one informant (A4) mentioned that Christian heritage and tradition was a part of the object clause: “we also have a Christian cultural heritage to convey and carry on”, she said, but hastened to add that this was a “sensitive and somewhat vulnerable” topic. The informant in A4 was the one who reflected most thoroughly on tensions within the object clause and on possible dilemmas related to dissemination of Christian cultural heritage in a kindergarten characterized by religious and cultural diversity. Although she worked in the least diverse of the seven kindergartens, she delivered the most explicit and nuanced reflection on this. All informants placed particular emphasis on the importance of cooperation with parents regarding the dissemination of values and cultural heritage, indicating that this is regarded as a somewhat difficult field.

## 7. ERP and Religious Tradition Dissemination

ERP concretizes central elements in the object clause and defines a specific learning outcome. We were most interested in the religious elements in ERP and asked about how the informants understood the learning outcome formulas on this, and how the kindergartens implemented the state regulations in everyday activities and in connection with religious festivals (cf. the [Framework Plan 2017](#), p. 55).

### 7.1. Christian Festivals

Christmas is the most widely celebrated religious festival in Norway. Previous research shows that it is marked in most kindergartens, and religion tends to be most visible in connection with the Christmas and the Advent period ([Hovdelien 2018](#), pp. 289–92). This is also the case in the seven kindergartens in our material, and the informants focused on “observing” or learning about religious festivals rather than on celebration. Christian traditions were conveyed in parallel with folklore and secular traditions. Most of our informants perceived the Christmas arrangements as a mediation of culture rather than of religion, and they stressed that there was no place for “preaching” (understood as declaring one religion to be true) in the kindergarten. The workplan of A1 even stated that: “The kindergarten is not to influence religiously in any way”.

The time reserved for the explicitly Christian part of the dissemination of tradition varied considerably. According to the informant in O1, the staff was “keen to speak about the content of Christmas, retell the Christmas story about the birth of Jesus”, but neither she nor the informants in A2, A3, O2 or O3 reported how many assembly times (samlingsstunder) they set aside for the dissemination of Christian traditions, and the written planning documents we received did not clarify this. In A4, four assembly times were spent on the dissemination of Christian tradition, while A1 spent one assembly time on this. In this kindergarten the catechist from the local parish was invited to conduct the dissemination of Christian tradition. Similar kinds of “outsourcing” of religious elements have been documented by others ([Krogstad 2017](#)). Retelling the nativity story from the Bible and singing or listening to Christian Christmas songs were the most frequently used methods. All but one kindergarten (O3) visited a local Lutheran church before Christmas.

One informant (A1) reported that her kindergarten had recently decided to tone down the Christian aspects of the festival for the benefit of more flexible or open rituals that could be interpreted according to the religious or non-religious background of each child. Children from Christian homes could interpret the lighting of candles or the advent calendar in a Christian way, while others could interpret them differently. In A2 the informant said that they would consider not visiting the church if some of the children were to be exempted from this activity. “It is a principle in our kindergarten that every child should be able to participate in all our activities”, she claimed, and inclusion was her main argument. The informants in A3 and A4 argued using cultural transmission and children’s need for knowledge. They were willing to accept that some children could be

exempted from some activities for religious or non-religious reasons. “We have to tell [the nativity story], the children will learn about it at school or later, but we must respect that some children cannot take part in all activities”, says one of the informants, adding that most Muslims think that the dissemination of the Christian tradition is acceptable.

“Easter [...] then nothing [Christian] happens apart from ‘yellow’ things [neutral or secular traditions]”, said the informant in O2. Easter, Pentecost and Ascension Day are marked by very few Norwegian kindergartens, despite the wording in the Framework Plan that demands the dissemination of traditions of Christian festivals in the plural. A4 was the only kindergarten in our material disseminating traditions about all the main Christian festivals, but the culturally diverse A3 visited the local church before Easter. The informant in A1 explained why the religious background for Easter was omitted in her kindergarten. It was “sinister” and too brutal for the children, she said, being particularly worried about refugee children having experienced violence before coming to Norway.

### *7.2. Festivals in Many Religions*

The Framework Plan emphasizes that festivals from religions and worldviews other than Christianity must be observed if “represented in the kindergarten”, and the religious background of the children in most of the seven kindergartens in our sample was varied. The informants were generally aware of the abovementioned wording and tried to implement this demand. In practice this mainly seemed to be understood as Eid. The neighborhood of O1 has many immigrants from non-Western countries, and the informant reported: “We mark holidays [...] those that are represented in the group”. She added that the staff were eager to establish a dialogue with the parents and cooperate with them on festival arrangements: “There’s no point in observing festival days if the parents don’t recognize the way it is done and practice religion in this way”, she pointed out. In her kindergarten, Eid is marked every year in cooperation with the parents, who tell the children about Islam and show prayer mats and the Quran to them. When asked what the kindergarten did in connection with Christmas, she replied that they “focus on presenting” the Christian background of the festival. She also said that the older children visit a church where a priest arranges the program.

A1 was the only kindergarten in our material that tried to combine the marking of religious festivals with “open” rituals and a pluralistic approach. The Advent period was used to focus on religions other than Christianity. When speaking about Jesus in Christianity, the informant underlined that he is important in Islam as well, and she stressed the similarities between the two religions, not the different teachings about him.

### *7.3. Religion in Everyday Life*

Despite some differences, the answers indicate that religion plays a marginal part of everyday life in the seven kindergartens. Two occasions were mentioned by several informants who said that religion was visible or spoken about in connection with food restrictions in Islam or other religions, and when the children commented on or asked about religion spontaneously.

Spontaneous reflections on religious topics are more personally demanding than serving different food, but the informants seemed open to engaging in dialogues on this in accordance with the Framework Plan, but few were specific on how often this happened. The informant in A2 reported that religion was not “a big theme” in her kindergarten but added that the staff wondered along with the children if they spoke about religion. In O2, where about 70 percent of the children were Muslims and most of the staff was secular, the informant claimed that the children were very concerned with religion: “They wonder [...] are occupied with the fact that some are Muslims, others not [...] especially when new children are admitted to the group”. On such occasions she stressed the importance of talking about religion, but she linked this to the kindergarten’s integration work rather than to the children’s individual religiosity or to learning outcome formulas in the ERP field of training. The informant in A4 was most specific on religious questions or comments

from children. She included a variety of examples, referring to the parents' mandate when it came to religious matters and describing the staff as well trained in taking this into consideration when answering. A couple of informants also mentioned excursions to religious buildings in the vicinity of the kindergarten as a way of implementing learning outcomes in ERP, but this did not seem to be much used.

According to the informants, religion may also be thematized in connection with prohibitions on social interaction between the sexes in Islam. The dissemination of religious tradition was hardly at stake on such occasions where it was linked to cooperation with the parents and promoting equality of the sexes according to Norwegian law. The informants considered such topics more difficult. When asked specifically, they mentioned parents being unwilling to shake hands with staff of the opposite sex, parents avoiding eye contact with staff of the opposite sex, changing diapers, or staff helping out at the lavatory of the opposite sex. Other examples of potentially difficult topics were children taking showers at the swimming pool, playing with "female" and "male" costumes and girls and boys playing together. The informants were, however, somewhat vague on how they met such challenges. "It usually works out gradually", one informant said (A3), but pinpointed that the staff did not accept parental wishes on separating girls and boys when playing: "It doesn't work like this in the kindergarten or at school", she comments. The informant in A1 reported that on certain occasions the staff had turned down parental wishes to promote equality in the kindergarten. For instance, they did not stop Muslim boys from dressing up in girl's costumes if they chose such costumes from the kindergarten's costume stand.

In summary, there were relatively small differences among most of our informants in interpreting and implementing the legal obligations on the dissemination of religious tradition. The most striking and recurring feature was what we characterize as a certain toning down of activities with Christian or religious content compared with what the legal framework prescribes. A4, and partly A3, were exceptions. Most informants, however, interpreted the object clause mainly as paragraph protecting diversity and "common" values. It was hardly considered to reflect specific Christian and humanist values, and few expressed thoughts about Christianity as a particularly important value foundation for Norwegian culture and society.

For the Framework Plan, the notion of having an obligation to convey the Christian cultural heritage and tradition was rather weak in most of the informants. The marking of Christmas as a religious festival and following up on children's questions were exceptions. In this respect there seems to be a certain discrepancy between the legal framework for Norwegian early childhood education and the practice adopted in the kindergartens in our sample. Previous research indicated the same trend (cf. [Hovdelien 2018](#), pp. 289–92). According to the Framework Plan, kindergartens are only obliged to mark festivals in religions other than Christianity if they are represented in the actual institution: the staff must "introduce the children to and observe important dates, holidays and customs in the Christian tradition and those of other religions and world views represented in the kindergarten" (the [Framework Plan 2017](#), p. 55). Notwithstanding this, many informants seemed to be more focused on presenting customs and knowledge about other religions, Islam in particular.

## 8. Discussion

The informants' justifications for what we interpreted as playing down Christianity seem to be that the kindergartens are more diverse now than earlier, representing different religions and worldviews through children, parents and staff. This may illustrate that religious diversity contributes to secularism, as Taylor claims (2007). According to him, the modern mentality is characterized by "secular immanence", the unspoken prerequisite that religious faith is of no general relevance to modern societies. To some of our informants, "secular immanence" seems to be caused by fear of creating tensions or division among the children.



Theories on multiculturalism may explain another finding: that most of the informants tended to place more emphasis on religious diversity than on Christian cultural heritage. Multiculturalism is a normative theory about how one ought to relate to the present day's multicultural society that may be applied to multi-religious situations in kindergartens. A multicultural strategy implies tolerance for religious differences and no demands on changing minorities' group relations or their traditions or customs (unless they are contrary to the law). Multiculturalism links individual identity and culture; we noticed several examples of this during the interviews. A couple of informants (A1, A3) would, for instance, accept that parents did not shake hands with staff of the opposite sex despite the prescribed value of equality in the object clause. It was just "tradition" for these parents, the argument went, and of no harm if not combined with discriminating activities such as refusing to let girls and boys play together (A1). Traditions from minorities generally seemed to be well preserved and even encouraged in accordance with multicultural ideology. Attitudes like this were expressed by most of the informants, but the word "multicultural" was never used. They seemed simply to have internalized a multiculturalism that permeates parts of Norwegian society. We did not find the neglect of other religions than Christianity that [Toft and Rosland \(2014\)](#) as well as [Krogstad \(2014\)](#) and [Krogstad and Hidle \(2015\)](#) found; we found rather the opposite result. Some informants seemed more eager to say that they disseminated information about religions other than Christianity. Although the informant in O1 said that the kindergarten visited a local church, she hastened to stress that: "We have also visited a local mosque . . . all the children took part". One informant, O2, emphasized that the staff focused more on secular festivals than on religious ones: "March 8th, May 1st, May 17th (the National Day in Norway), the UN Day. The content of these days breaks the daily routine in a nice way and fundamentally conveys the same values . . .", she claimed. Several other informants were mainly concerned about conveying "neutral" knowledge with secularist and multiculturalist legitimation. We also found that six out of seven kindergartens were thematizing the Islamic religious festival Eid similar to their pedagogical work related to Christian religious festivals. It is worth noting that this way of handling Islamic religious festivals is in line with the legal framework and not up to the pedagogical leaders to decide.

The local context can only be part of the explanation for differences in local practice on the dissemination of religious tradition. A1, for instance, is located in a small town in the middle of the Norwegian Bible belt but focuses more on religious diversity than on Christianity. A2 and A3 are situated in different parts of Kristiansand, which has been called "the Christian Capital of Norway", but they implement the learning outcome from the Framework Plan and ERP differently. A3 has a larger proportion of immigrant children and is more religiously diverse than A2, but still focuses more on the dissemination of the Christian tradition than all other kindergartens in our material apart from A4. O2 is situated in a less religiously diverse part of Oslo than O1 and O3, but this is not reflected in the interviews. In O3, the kindergarten with the least religious tradition dissemination in our sample, the informant reported that she is a non-believer and politically radical, like most of the staff, and that she conceals this neither from the children nor from the parents. These examples indicate that the attitudes among the staff and their understanding of the legal framework could be more decisive than location when it comes to implementing the legal obligations on the dissemination of religious tradition.

## 9. Concluding Remarks—Secular Kindergartens in a Diverse Society

As expected, the informants interpreted and implemented the legal framework for early childhood education differently. There were, however, striking similarities between most of our informants. They tended to downplay the Christian aspect in the object clause, and they did not stick to a literal interpretation of the formulations on learning outcomes on Christianity, other religions and secular worldviews in the Framework Plan. Most implemented demands from the legal framework in a minimalistic way when it came to religion, and they answered in ways that reflected either secularism or multiculturalism.

Over recent decades specific Christian elements in the legal framework have gradually become less specific or have even diminished. According to our interpretations of the interviews, most of our informants seemed to contribute to a further secularization of everyday life in the kindergartens through their understanding of the legal obligations and their alleged practice. Few seemed to make religion and religious culture visible to the extent that Sagberg (2020) generally argued for. Nor does little visible religion in kindergartens promote the development of the “religious sensibility” that Finnish researchers have recommended (Gearon and Kuusisto 2020).

Ideas related to either Casanova’s “self-contained secularity” or multicultural attitudes prevail amongst our informants. An historically hegemonic understanding of reality as secular seems to have displaced religious worldviews for most of them, as with most of the Norwegian population. In accordance with this, religion no longer has a (great) place in the public sphere but is relegated to the private sphere and is often found in minority groups that are regarded as somewhat exotic. Christmas was marked, but other Christian festivals hardly seemed to be thematized despite the plural term on festivals in the Framework Plan, with A4 as an exception. Parallel to this, Eid was marked, but not other Muslim festivals. The religious elements of Christmas were mixed with folklore and secular traditions. The moral education was based on “common values”, but the kindergarten staff generally cooperated with religious parents to ensure that religious restrictions were not violated. Reflections on the dissemination of Christian traditions as an expression of “cultural heritage” were also scarce, and few of the informants seemed to regard themselves as cultural preservers when it came to a Christian cultural heritage. Based on the interviews, most of the kindergartens in our material appear to be predominantly secular, thus reflecting a societal development even more than the legal framework for the Norwegian ECE does.

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