Secularism and religious traditions in non-confessional Swedish preschools: entanglements of religion and cultural heritage

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ABSTRACT

Swedish preschools are supposed to be non-confessional. At the same time, they are supposed to pass on a cultural heritage of a nation where the Lutheran Church has permeated society for centuries. Based on a study of traditions and religion in Swedish preschools, this article describes and discusses how preschools work with religion as an aspect of cultural heritage and as regularly occurring activities and themes during the preschool year. The empirical data consist of a survey about traditions in preschools, video ethnography in two preschools, and group interviews with preschool staff. The article centres around the question of how a cultural heritage is passed on without simultaneously passing on religion. Although the data show that all preschools have special activities in relation to Christmas and Easter, it also demonstrate a reluctance to speak to the children about what the teachers understand as religion. Drawing on the notion of secularism and Smart’s dimensions of religion, the article shows, on the one hand, the difficulty of emptying religious practices of religion, and on the other hand, the difficulty of reducing religion to only one dimension. As a social phenomenon, religion is complex, contingent, and multidimensional.

KEYWORDS

Preschool education; secularism; cultural heritage

Introduction

We pay a visit to a church, where we mainly sing Christmas carols and other children’s songs such as ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’. The priest does not really speak about religion. She usually asks the children if they know why the church bells ring and wishes them a merry Christmas. (Survey 2 Question 22)

We don’t tell the children why we celebrate Christmas. (Survey 2 Question 22)

The quotations above are comments in response to a survey question about how Swedish preschools celebrate Christmas. Like the teachers quoted here, several other preschool teachers stressed in their responses that Christmas was celebrated, but without paying attention to its religious aspects.

The point of departure for this article is the question: How do you pass on a cultural heritage permeated by religion to children without simultaneously passing on religion? The article presents and discusses how Swedish preschools work with their task of ‘passing on a cultural heritage – its values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next’ (Skolverket 2011, 6).

Considering how Christianity, in the form of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, dominated and permeated the society for centuries, it is evident that the Swedish cultural heritage is, to
a considerable extent, a Christian cultural heritage (cf. Skeie 2017). The Lutheran Evangelical Church of Sweden was the state religion between 1593 and 2000. However, the impact of religion on society and the practices and minds of people have changed considerably. Today, Sweden is often said to be one of the most secularised countries in the world (Kasselstrand 2015).

The task of the preschools to pass on ‘a cultural heritage’ highly influenced by religion is further complicated by the Education Act (SFS 201:800), which states that Swedish schools (including preschools) should be non-confessional (cf. Andreassen, 2014). Based on a study of traditions and religion in Swedish preschools, this article presents an effort to disentangle and discuss how the preschools work with religion as an aspect of cultural heritage and of activities and themes that occur regularly throughout the preschool year. Drawing on the notion of secularism (Asad 2009; Taylor 2007) and Smart’s dimensions of religion (Smart 1989), I argue that (a) preschool practices connected to religion are enactments and examples of Swedish secularism; (b) the practices and positions of the preschool teachers are based on a one-dimensional and reductive conception of religion as individual (intellectual) conviction; and (c) recognising religions as multidimensional can facilitate a complex and flexible way of enacting religion as an aspect of cultural heritage.

**Background**

In this section, I first briefly describe the Swedish preschool system and then give some background into how the Swedish curriculum for preschool addresses issues of cultural heritage, tradition, and religion.

In Sweden, over 80% of all children between 1 and 5 years old are enrolled in preschool education (Sverige 2014). This makes preschools into arenas where children meet with and are socialised into commonly shared social norms and practices that go beyond the family. Since almost all children attend preschools, they receive a similar Swedish childhood experience. In that way, preschools are formative for what is considered not only normal for a Swedish childhood, but also for Swedish values and practices in general. Thus, preschool is the first step in making children into national citizens. Preschools are spaces where Swedes and Sweden are made.

Although preschools are part of the educational system, attendance is not obligatory. However, all children between the ages of 3 and 5 are entitled to 15 h of free preschool a week. Unlike with other parts of schooling, the curriculum asserts goals to strive for rather than achievement goals. In line with this, the assessment of whether or not the goals are reached is not supposed to be focused on the individual child but on the quality of the whole preschool.

As mentioned above, the Swedish preschool curriculum states that one of the tasks of the preschool is ‘passing on a cultural heritage – its values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next’ (Skolverket 2011, 6). Although the curriculum gives few clues to what this assignment means in relation to preschool practices, some aspects of the content and concept of cultural heritage are more elaborated than others. Concerning values, these are defined as human rights, democracy, individual freedom and integrity, equal opportunities, gender equality, sense of empathy and concern for others, openness for others, and solidarity with the weak (Skolverket 2011, 5). Other aspects of the content are not described as related to values or cultural heritage. In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on science, mathematics, and literacy in the preschool. These subjects are represented as if given, essential, outside culture(s) and devoid of values. This is also true for the section about the importance of facilitating language development. Cultural heritage differs from these subjects in that it is represented as situated and as a contingent matter of values and traditions.

This difference between representations of different goals or content fields in the curriculum can be understood in relation to how they relate to the future or to the past. Using the terminology of Johan Fornäs, among others, they are expressions of both cultural roots and cultural routes (Fornäs 1995, 3). In stressing specific knowledge fields – maths, science, and literacy – the curriculum points to future needs of the children as well as of society. Focusing on them is a call
from the future, when and where these competences are expected to be useful both for the individual and for society as a whole.

In contrast, the task of passing on a cultural heritage is a matter of mooring or forming belonging in the past. This positions the preschool children in the present, between what came before them and what they will need in the future. There is a stark difference in the curriculum between representations of the calls from the past and the future. Descriptions of knowledge in natural sciences, mathematics, and literacy are detailed, whereas there are no details in the description of the dominant tradition and history, the shared legacy from the past. Moreover, the concept and phenomenon of religion is conspicuously absent in the (scarce) formulations about culture and tradition. The curriculum mentions the term twice, once as something that should be respected (p. 9) and once as something that should not be used as a basis for discrimination (p. 3). This shows that, in the curriculum, the concepts of cultural heritage and tradition are used as floating signifiers without clear definitions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This is even more so for religion. If cultural heritage and religion come forward as floating signifiers, religion appears as an empty signifier with no content (Af Burén 2015).

One way to make sense of the lack of religious content in the notion of cultural heritage in the curriculum is that Sweden has a long history of – at least perceived – monoculturalism as well as mono-religion. Thus, the policy text articulates the presumption that Swedish cultural heritage is self-evident and needs no further definition. The lack of recognition of religion as part of this cultural heritage makes the hegemony and influence of the Lutheran Church of Sweden redundant and invisible. Considering the historically dominant position of this Church, the so-called Swedish cultural heritage is obviously intersected with religious practices, narratives, and beliefs (Af Burén 2015; Thurfjell 2016). Despite this, when the curriculum mentions religion, it is as an identity marker of other individuals in need of acceptance, not as part of social life overall or as a possible way for everybody to make sense of life. From this perspective, the absence of guidelines for how preschool teachers should work with religion in relation to the cultural heritage can not only appear odd but can also put the teachers in problematic positions.

Besides the national curriculum, Swedish preschools are guided by the Educational Act (Sverige 2017), which states that teaching in Swedish schools (including preschools) should be non-confessional. This means that teachers should teach about religion, but not teach in religion. The formulation of religious studies as non-confessional was preceded by formulations in which teaching about religion in compulsory school should be ‘objective and unbiased’ (1962 års skollag 1962). As argued by Skeie in a Norwegian context, this demand has produced a situation where the ambition of teachers to be neutral and impartial obfuscates the influence and presence of the dominant Lutheran Church in national traditions and practices (Skeie 2017). This not only makes the influence of the Church invisible, it simultaneously makes Christian traditions into self-evident, common, non-religious cultural practices. I argue that the reluctance of preschool teachers to emphasise religious aspects of religious traditions, as well as the differences between how religion and other subject areas are represented in the curriculum, is related to what I call Swedish secularism.

**Secularism – intersections of nationalism and protestant conceptions of religion**

In this article, the concept of secularism is used to elucidate and discuss approaches to and enactments of religion in Swedish preschools. Secularism relates to, but is not tantamount to, secularisation. Differing from the latter, secularism stresses contexts where secularisation is not only a description of relations between state and religion, but also where it is seen as a significant trait of the nation. Thus, secularism is prescriptive for what is regarded as modern and normal in a specific culture or nation.

Considering 400 years of entanglement between the Church and the state, it might seem peculiar that Sweden is often described as an extremely secularised country (Kasselstrand 2015)
where most people neither believe in nor practise religion. There are in fact ways of describing religion in Sweden that give a different picture; the description of the secularised Sweden is not unequivocal (Thurfjell 2016). Although membership and participation is declining, in 2017, 59% of Sweden’s population were members of the Church of Sweden, and 42% of all newborns were baptised into the Church (Svenska kyrkan 2018). Because Sweden has become increasingly multicultural, there are considerable numbers of religious practitioners of other faiths. In 2016, 10% of the population were members in some of the 46 denominations that receive state funding (Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund 2017), or in the Catholic Church (Katolska kyrkan 2018). Due to the prohibition of keeping records of religious affiliation, it is impossible to present exact figures of religious practitioners of denominations that do not receive state funding. Among these are the majority of Swedish Muslims, but there are also Sikhs, Buddhists, and others. This nuances the image of Sweden as a completely secularised country. In Sweden, there is a lot of religion going on. The reason this is not taken into account in the dominant conception of a secularised Sweden is that religion and religiosity are defined more in terms of faith than practice. This facilitates the form of religiosity that Grace Davie has called ‘belonging without believing’ (Davie 2012). Although people belong to, or express affinity with, a religious organisation, they are not identified nor do they identify themselves as religious because they lack a pronounced religious conviction.

The concept of secularism was developed in relation to its sibling concept secularisation. The way it points to how the image of the nation intersects with specific conceptions of religion is akin to the concepts ‘civil religion’ (Bellah 1991), and ‘cultural religion’ (Demerath III, 2000). Secularisation is a sociological concept pointing to situations where religions as institutions, practices, and philosophies have lost power and influence over politics, governance, and individuals (see e.g. Berger 1967; Bruce 1996; Dobbleare 2002). Secularism differs from this in that it does not only signify that religious institutions and practices have lost power in relation to the state and the citizens. It points to situations where the absence of religious power and influence has become a fundamental principle for how nation states perceive themselves as well the relation between state and religion (Asad 2009; Taylor 2007). Secularism is at hand when a specific form of nationalism, which privileges particular Western Protestant notions of religion and religiosity, has become hegemonic.

Although secularism claims not to take a stand in matters of religion, Wendy Brown (2013) argues that it is inherently generative and suffused with religious content. Nations dominated by secularism affirm a specific way of expressing religion as modern and normal. Thus, secularism is a situation where religion not only has lost power over society and individuals but where it has been replaced by the absence or incomprehensibility of everything religious as the obsolete dangerous other. According to Brown, Western secularism is signified by the following claims: (a) secularism generates religious neutrality; (b) secularism is equally available to all religions; (c) secularism generates tolerance as mutual respect among religions; and (d) secularism generates gender equality and freedom for women (Brown 2013). She argues, as have others (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1974; Taylor 2007) before her, that the imagery of the secular presumes a conception of religion as a private matter belonging to the private sphere, that is, religion as personal belief and choice. Brown argues that this is not a neutral conception of religion. Religion as individual choice is a minoritarian and specific Protestant way of conceiving religion, unfamiliar and strange to most other religions. Arguing that other religions, such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, are compatible with secularism is simply not true. Demanding this is an act of power. It is an act of oppression. This is why secularism is incapable of generating tolerance and mutual respect among religions. Although claiming to be culturally neutral, it enforces specific Protestant ideas about what religion and religiosity are. This not only positions all other forms of religiosity as obsolete and other, it also affirms the tenets of Western culture as superior. It is a postcolonial and Eurocentric position. This is evident in relation to the idea that secularism generates gender equality. This is not so much connected to its Protestant roots, but
more to a colonial and modernist mindset, where the position and/or lack of freedom for women are seen in terms of modernity and progress. In connecting the absence of religion with gender equality, religiosity is simultaneously constituted as a threat to women. Religiosity, beliefs, and practices are demonised not only as obsolete but also as dangerous (especially for women). Hereby religiosity is constructed as a threat to rationality, modernity, human rights, and democracy. Consequently, secularism entails the othering of visible and explicit markers and performances of religion and religiosity.

The notion of Swedish secularism can elucidate the preschool teachers’ claims to celebrate Christmas without expressing religion. However, despite the demand to be non-confessional and despite Swedish secularism, they still celebrate and introduce the children to Christmas traditions and practices. Are they then practising religion, or are these activities enactments of non-religious cultural practices? In order to argue that in doing this the preschool teachers are in fact practising religion even if they do not want to, I will make use of Smart’s (1989) phenomenology of religion, which is elaborated below in relation to Swedish secularism.

**Seven dimensions of religion**

Smart’s (1989) phenomenology of religion in terms of seven dimensions can elucidate how secularism, in Sweden and elsewhere, is based on a reduction of religion which only considers the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, leaving all other dimensions aside. Hereby, secularism obfuscates religion as a multidimensional phenomenon. Besides the doctrinal and philosophical dimension of religion, there are ritual, experiential, narrative, ethical, social, and material dimensions. Some religions emphasise one or two dimensions at the expense of others. Applying this phenomenology to Protestantism would in most cases lead to the conclusion that Protestantism is a form of Christianity dominated by the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, where knowledge of and belief in the doctrines are seen as the most significant traits of what it means to be religious. If these traits are missing, an individual or a collective are not considered religious (Af Burén 2015; Reimers 1995; Thurfjell 2016). Swedish secularism is thus based on the Protestant conception of religion as believing, where all other aspects are subordinated to personal belief in and knowledge of doctrines. This, I argue, becomes visible in how the preschool teachers in our study approach, talk about, and enact practices that they consider or do not consider religious. Based on ignorance or silence about the religious motivation for a certain practice, they enact religious practices as non-religious.

**Methodology and data**

The aim of the overall research project of which this study is a part is to explore how preschool teachers understand and enact cultural heritage in terms of tradition and religion (Puskás and Andersson 2017). In this project, we have conducted video ethnography in two preschools in 2015–2016 in order to find out how they pay attention to, or manifest, tradition, cultural heritage, and religion. In order to produce more general knowledge about the work with traditions and religion in Swedish preschools, we conducted a survey. The survey was sent to 465 preschools in 23 different municipalities. We received 1189 individual answers with at least one – in most cases more – answer from each of the preschools that received the survey. Based on an edited film from the two preschools, we also interviewed groups of personnel from 15 different preschools. We chose preschools based on variation in terms of ethnic background, size of municipalities, and membership in the Church of Sweden. We conducted interviews in one municipality where 13.7% of the inhabitants are members of the Church of Sweden, as well as in a municipality where 73% are members. The rest of the participating municipalities had figures in between these extremes. The answers in the survey confirmed what was observed in the videos, as well as the results from the interviews. The arguments in this article are primarily based on results from the survey.
Christmas and Easter as culture and/or religion

The survey demonstrates that all participating preschools mark and have special activities in relation to Christmas and Easter. The survey, observations, and interviews all indicate reluctance (sometimes to the point of hostility) among Swedish preschool teachers to speak to children about what the teachers understand as religion.

Christmas is conspicuous in the preschools during all of December. The survey shows that 93% pay attention to Christmas, and 97% pay attention to Lucia, which is a holiday within the whole set of celebrations and practices in relation to Christmas. In many preschools, the children perform a Lucia parade for their relatives. In preparation, they rehearse songs and declamations weeks ahead. Another Christian holiday that emerges as important is Easter, with 92% of the respondents marking Easter as a Swedish cultural holiday. Although over 90% have activities in the preschool in connection with these two main Christian holidays, only 55% of the respondents give a positive answer to the question ‘Do you mark religious holidays?’ One of the comments in relation to this question indicates the rationale behind this discrepancy. The respondent writes:

Yes, we probably do that, but without understanding that this is what we’re doing! We craft and make Easter trinkets but do not emphasise why we celebrate these holidays.

The comment displays a conception where doing religion without talking about religion is regarded as not doing religion at all. In a similar way, other respondents wrote that they celebrated both Christmas and Easter, ‘but not in a religious sense’ or ‘not from a religious perspective’. One respondent wrote, ‘I don’t think we are allowed to’. In the latter comment, enacting a non-confessional position is tantamount to not talking about or marking practices as religious.

The avoidance of informing the children why religious holidays are celebrated, or of recounting religious stories, was also common in the observations and the interviews. In line with secularism and a Protestant conception of religion, the preschool teachers regarded taking part in Christmas and Easter activities as non-religious, secular practices. This is made possible by adhering to a one-dimensional doctrinal conception of religion, where refraining from the religious narratives and beliefs that constitute the motif for the holidays makes Christmas and Easter into national secular traditions devoid of religion.

The above stands out as remarkable in relation to the space and emphasis given to these holidays within the preschool year. Almost all of the activities in December relate to waiting and preparing for Christmas. The survey shows that the first step in the Christmas preparations is the lighting of the first Advent candle (69%) and the opening of the first flap on the Advent calendar (66%). All the preschools in the survey did something to mark Advent as the start of the wait for Christmas. The activities during this wait differed between the preschools, but in almost every preschool, the children (and sometimes also the parents) were engaged in Christmas activities. They decorated the preschools with stars, Santa Clauses, angels, Christmas trees, ginger cookies, and other Christmas trinkets. Despite all these Christmas activities, only one-third of the respondents reported that they inform the children about why they mark Advent. Even less, 9% reported that they visit a church with the children to look at the Christmas crib. Although 92% marked Easter, this holiday was less spread out in time. In the preschools we observed, Easter dominated the activities the week before the Easter holiday. In one of these preschools, Easter was the subject for circle time, during which the children were asked how they celebrated Easter. An Easter witch also visited them. In the other preschool we observed, the group took part in an event in a church in order to listen to the biblical Easter story, although with disclaimers in relation to the resurrection of Christ (Puskás and Andersson 2017).

The phenomenology outlined by Smart (1989) does not limit religion to doctrine and conviction. It can thus elucidate a number of religious dimensions in the preschool practices in relation to Christmas and Easter. The practical and ritual dimension of Christmas includes Lucia parades for the families or just for the preschool, lighting of Advent candles, baking Lucia buns or ginger cookies,
singing Christmas songs, opening a new flap on the Advent calendar each day during Advent, as well as feasting on a Christmas buffet. There are also examples of the material dimension of Christmas such as Christmas trees, Advent candlesticks, a Christmas star in the windows, narrations about and trinkets representing Santa Claus, and specific Christmas food.

The practical/ritual dimension of Easter is enacted by activities where the children make Easter trimmings in the form of chickens, painted eggs, etc., and by eating an Easter buffet or dressing up as Easter witches, Easter bunnies, or chickens, and searching for hidden Easter eggs with candy inside. The observations we made also evinced that it is common to plant grass or garden cress in relation to Easter. The material dimension of Easter at the preschool is predominantly expressed by eggs, more eggs, Easter twigs with coloured feathers, chickens, and, not least, candy (preferably in the form of eggs).

In addition to the material and practical dimension, there is the experiential and emotional dimension in the form of the joy of eating candy. This is very special for the children because most Swedish preschools practise a sugar-free policy. Additional examples of the emotional and experiential dimension are cozy feelings of sitting in the dark with candlelight, the warmth of the candles, and the experience of singing, and sometimes dancing, together. The activities and artefacts of the holidays produce experiences and sentiments connected to these special occasions, setting them apart as different from other days and holidays.

Drawing on Smart, marking the two holidays in these ways brings them forward as expressions, enactments, and also a passing on of religion in action and materiality, producing experiences and emotions. It is also possible to argue that the activities in the preschools are enactments of a social dimension of religion, whereby marking the holidays in the way they do, the preschool and all the children connect to practices that encompass most of the Swedish society surrounding the preschool. During Christmas, there are Advent lamps and candlesticks, Christmas trees, Christmas songs, and images of Santa all over. At Easter time, there are Easter twigs, eggs, and candy in every grocery store. In repeating this in the preschools, the children become part of a common community, where these things are natural. This is so, even if the narratives and beliefs that initially motivated and are expressed by the practices are never made salient.

Conclusion

The Swedish preschool curriculum states that preschools should pass on a cultural heritage, including traditions, from one generation to the next. Differing from some other traditions celebrated in many of the preschools, such as Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and Midsummer, the two traditions that are most frequent and elicit the most activities – Christmas and Easter – are Christian holidays. Furthermore, unlike Halloween and Valentine’s Day, these Christian holidays are also national holidays, which make them constitutive elements of the nation state. This evinces both a clear limit of the secularisation of the nation of Sweden where (Lutheran) Christianity has a privileged position. The nation of Sweden is not religiously neutral.

Secularism, as a way of making sense of the position of religion in Sweden, is helpful in order to understand how and why preschool teachers largely empty the notion of cultural heritage – its traditions and history – of religious motivation. Based on a conception of religion as personal conviction and a private matter, the teachers understand explaining the narrative background and doctrines related to Christian holidays as a breach of the requirement to be non-confessional. Explaining the religious meaning and history of the Christian holidays would be an affront to the secularist notion that religion is private and therefore should not be expressed or enforced by public institutions such as preschools. However, engaging in practices connected to the Christian holidays, such as lighting Advent candles, hanging a Christmas star in the window, eating Easter eggs, being visited by an Easter witch, etc., are not perceived as enactments of religion but as secular national traditions relevant to and inoffensive for all children, regardless of the religion of their families.
From this two questions emerge. The first is whether it is possible to pass on a cultural heritage permeated with religion without recognising that it encompasses religious traditions. The second is whether it is possible to enact material and practical dimensions of religion or religious traditions without simultaneously enacting religion. Analyses of practices in the preschools in connection with Christmas and Easter using Smart’s (1989) phenomenology evince that the teachers enact and enforce practical and ritual dimensions of religion (lighting the Advent candle, using an Advent calendar, eating Christmas and Easter food, crafting Christmas and Easter decorations, growing grass to illustrate that life is returning in the spring, etc.). Furthermore, in doing this they also make way for experiential and emotional dimensions (joy, hope, excitement, etc.) as well as material (Christmas and Easter symbols), mythical (the Christmas gospel and the Easter narrative), and social (Lucia, Easter performance in church) dimensions. The way that the preschools mark Christmas and Easter from this perspective constitutes them as religious practices and not as purely secular traditions.

Swedish secularism conceptualises religion as belief, and as belief, it is considered a private matter that no one, especially not society, should impose on anybody. In the preschools, a paradoxical situation emerges, where teachers and children practise religion but without recognising religion in what to them is ‘mere tradition’. Religion can thus be present without being recognised.

Discussion

This article shows, on the one hand, the difficulty of emptying religious practices of religion, and on the other hand, the difficulty of reducing religion to only one religious dimension. As a social phenomenon, religion is complex, contingent, and multidimensional. Swedish secularism, where legislation, policies, and other dominant discourses delimit religion to personal intellectual knowledge and belief in religious doctrines, fails to recognise religion as multidimensional. Thus, participating in religious traditions without being able to display knowledge and belief is, from a secularist point of view, regarded as ‘mere tradition’ or hypocrisy. As stated above, this is a minoritarian, Eurocentric, and Protestant conception of religion (Brown 2013; Thurfjell 2016). Globally and historically, it is more prevalent to understand religion in a more holistic way, where beliefs, stories, rituals, ethics, institutions, and artefacts together constitute the religion. This is the majoritarian conception of religion.

Looking at religion in preschool from a more majoritarian perspective, one can conclude that talking about religion is no more confessional than practising religiously motivated tradition. The multidimensional perspective on religion makes it salient that the division between a Swedish cultural heritage and religion is superficial. The two are entangled. Thus, biblical stories are just as much a constitutive element in the cultural heritage as lighting Advent candles, taking part in Lucia parades, or painting Easter eggs. Not telling the stories or the motivations for the holidays is tantamount to denying the children a crucial element of the cultural heritage that the preschool is assigned to pass on.

Several preschools in our study are multicultural and multireligious. This raises questions about what cultural heritage means in that context. Some preschool teachers state that, because of the presence of religions they consider other, they are reluctant to explicitly address anything that can
be apprehended as imposing Christian faith. This problem is largely formulated from a secularist perspective where all ways of expressing religion are both interpreted as belief and conviction and apprehended as obsolete and dangerous. Taking a multidimensional perspective can offer at least part of a solution to the dilemmas these teachers express. If religion is understood as multidimensional, it is possible to mark a plethora of religiously motivated holidays as well as to tell stories from different religious traditions as part of the cultural heritage that emerges in the context of the specific preschool.

This article suggests that making sense of religion as multidimensional – not just individual conviction – could help preschool teachers address religious practices and narratives and still adhere to the curriculum demand that the teaching should be non-confessional. Preschools do not need to refrain from marking religious holidays in order to be non-confessional. Quite the opposite; in order to pass on a relevant and more authentic cultural heritage to the children in a multicultural and multireligious Sweden, they need to bring more religion, and more religions, into the preschools.

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