Keeping Education Non-Confessional While Teaching Children about Religion

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ABSTRACT
The paper explores how in a Swedish preschool with a religious profile teachers balance between keeping education non-confessional and teaching about a tradition with religious roots. In this paper, the focus is on how and why the secular and religious narratives are intertwined in a play that aims to teach children about why Easter is celebrated. Theoretically we combine Grimmitt’s theoretical concepts of learning about and learning from religion with Smart’s analytical framework. The analysis reveals that through translating between the secular and religious narratives the play offered an opportunity to learn both about and from religion.

In Sweden, over 80% of all children between the ages of 1 and 5 years are enrolled in preschool education. In the 3–5 age range, the rate is 95%. Swedish preschool is thus an important socializing agent. Within the Swedish educational system, of which preschool is an integral part, the concept of freedom of religion is understood in the sense that education is declared to be nonconfessional. This implies that teaching should be neutral in relation to different religions. Thus, in the Swedish education system as a whole, religious education implies “teaching and learning about religion as well as teaching and learning from religion, but not in religion.” Nevertheless, in Swedish preschools where the holidays tied to Lutheran Christian traditions are widely celebrated, but whose curriculum does not include any tasks related to either teaching about or teaching in religion, the religious roots of certain traditions pose challenges for preschool teachers.

According to the National Curriculum for Preschool, one of the tasks of the preschool is to pass on “a cultural heritage … from one generation to
This wording indicates that “cultural heritage” plays an important role in defining the tasks of preschool teachers as far as the transmission of cultural norms is concerned. At the same time, although cultural heritage is conceptualized in terms of “its values, traditions and history, language and knowledge,” it is not explicitly stated whether or not religion is seen as part of cultural heritage. Thus, the wording allows different interpretations, and it is up to the preschool team or individual preschool teachers to determine whether religion ought to be seen as part of the cultural heritage that the preschool should pass on from one generation to the next.

The Education Act makes a clear distinction between education and teaching. Teaching refers to “such goal-oriented processes that under the guidance of teachers or preschool teachers aim for development and learning through retrieval and development of knowledge and values,” whereas education is “the activity in which teaching takes place on the basis of certain goals.” At the preschool level, the difference between teaching and education is not always clear-cut; and, as pointed out above, the Swedish preschool curriculum does not include either any reference to teaching about religion(s) or any ideas about how preschool teachers ought to deal with religious issues. Nevertheless, the provisions of the Educational Act regarding nonconfessional education in preschools are specified in a document issued by the Swedish National Agency for Education, the purpose of which is to offer legal advice. According to this document, circle time—a common group routine in Swedish preschools—can take place in a church if it is designed so that the emphasis is on traditions, solemnity, and togetherness and does not involve any religious elements exemplified as prayer, blessing, or creed. Moreover, the provisions of this document indicate that the preschool is seen as an educational context within which teaching about religion may be seen as an integral part of teaching about cultural heritage.

This article is part of a research project about whether religion is considered part of Swedish cultural heritage in Swedish preschools. Our overall aim is to explore whether it is possible to pass on a Swedish cultural heritage (which is a task given to Swedish preschool teachers) without including the religious aspects of Swedish traditions. In this article, the focus is on how and why the secular and religious narratives are intertwined in a play that aims to teach children about why Easter is celebrated.

Survey of the field

States differ in terms of how their early childhood education is organized and administered, and consequently the scope and content of early childhood education differs significantly. Nevertheless, as most Western societies
have experienced an increase in cultural and religious diversity over the last 50 years, we can expect that the challenges faced by early childhood educators, as far as cultural reproduction and intercultural sensitivity are concerned, will show at least some similarities. Studies on how critical multiculturalism is implemented in preschools in various Western societies indicate that religious diversity among preschool children (1–6) is usually accommodated through a general awareness of cultural diversity. Based on research on how early childhood education tackles the challenges of religious diversity in the Austrian and German contexts, it has been acknowledged that religious education has the capacity to provide children with knowledge about religious diversity and sensitivity towards cultural difference as well as contributing to fulfilling the aims of education in terms of ethics and values. Nevertheless, as Schweitzer has shown based on his research in German preschools, in spite of the fact that dealing with religious diversity is an integral part of preschool practice, religion, and religious education remain a neglected issue in public and educational debates.

In the secular Lutheran Finnish context an intercultural, worldview sensitive approach has been advocated as a general educational approach. The point of departure in this research is that individuals hold “a particular ontological, epistemological and ethical orientation to the world” and to “humanity and life questions.” In preschools where children have diverse cultural backgrounds, early childhood educators face moral challenges in their everyday work that can be addressed by a worldview sensitivity that involves the ability to work inclusively with both religious and nonreligious worldviews. Nevertheless, although researchers outside Sweden emphasize the potential benefits of religious education in early childhood education on a practical level, issues related to religious identifications are often seen through the perceived limitations that religions bring to preschools’ everyday practice.

The Swedish model of religion education has been described as a non-confessional multifaith compulsory school subject with the aim of providing objective knowledge about religions in a pluralistic manner. Thus, from a European perspective, where most countries have an opt-out possibility, Sweden stands out with its ambition to teach all pupils from the first grade of primary school about different religions as well as so-called nonreligious worldviews. Nevertheless, research has shown that the ambition to keep Swedish religion education neutral and objective is challenged by the influence of Lutheran traditions and “a Protestant model of secularization.” Moreover, criticism against this model of religion education has also been raised by different religious denominations in Sweden who have argued that “non-denominational religion education is not education about religion and religions … but rather education into atheism and
Unlike at other levels of compulsory education in Swedish preschools (1–7), religion education is not part of the curriculum. As pointed out in the introduction, the curriculum does not mention religion either as a subject in its own right or as part of cultural heritage. This is one of the reasons why preschool teachers feel unsure about how to deal with cultural traditions that are deeply rooted in Christianity and consider religion to be a sensitive issue.

Compared to the Norwegian preschool curriculum, which acknowledges that the ethical values promoted in early childhood education are deeply rooted in Lutheran Christianity, the ethical code of the Swedish preschool curriculum is founded on the idea that neutrality of values is both possible and desirable. Thus, apart from the challenge posed by the diversity of worldviews among children, preschool teachers at Swedish preschools also face the challenge of how to teach about cultural heritage with Lutheran Christian roots while keeping education nonconfessional, neutral, and objective.

Theoretical considerations and points of departure

In this article, religion is treated as a human worldview that, similar to secular ideologies, can be understood as a system of thought. We combine Grimmitt’s theoretical concepts of learning about and learning from religion with Smart’s theory according to which modern Western world religious and secular ideologies, as human worldviews, can be studied from the same analytical framework.

To be able to study the distinctive character of human worldviews, Smart introduced a multidimensional model within which the different dimensions interact with each other in various ways and to different degrees. The seven dimensions of secular and religious ideologies as delineated by Smart are as follows: (1) The practical and ritual dimension refers to the practices and rituals through which individuals develop spiritual awareness and ethical insight and communities reenact their stories to perform their beliefs through action. (2) The experiential and emotional dimension refers to the feelings evoked by rituals such as prayer and worship and the emotional experiences related to religious and secular practices. (3) The narrative or mythic dimension refers to the myths, images and stories which pass from generation to generation. The stories, told orally or in written form, may be founded on historical facts but are usually mixed with symbolism. (4) The doctrinal and philosophical dimension refers to a philosophy or system of doctrines that are systematically formulated and constitute an intellectually coherent whole. The content of doctrines can vary greatly from one worldview to another. (5) The ethical and legal dimension focuses on formal and informal, written or orally transmitted laws, regulations and behavioral
precepts for conduct which the followers are expected to adopt. (6) The social and institutional dimension refers to the social organization through which the tradition/belief system is preserved and passed on. (7) The material dimension refers to places and objects that are considered sacred.29

In this article, Smart’s theory is used to show which dimensions of the Lutheran Christian religion are used in the play performed for children with the aim of exploring how teaching about religion is possible in a non-confessional educational setting. Grimmitt’s concept of learning about and learning from religion is based on the view that, in a secular context, religious education has an instrumental value and religion is taught and learned for educational purposes and “not for the purposes of nurturing religious faith.”30 Because, according to the recommendations of the Swedish National Agency for Education, religious traditions may be taught about in a Church context as long as the teaching activity does not include confessional elements such as prayer, blessing or creed31, we assume that as long as the dogmatic dimension is avoided teaching is about religion and not in religion. Based on this assumption we consider traditions with religious roots as potential educational gifts in Grimmitt’s sense32. This implies that “teaching about religious tradition, indeed every piece of religious content or phenomenon has the power to give every pupil, irrespective of their own religious commitment, an educational ‘gift.’”33 This theoretical model allows us to explore whether teaching about Easter offers an educational gift in terms of a possibility to learn from a tradition with religious roots.

Methodology, context, and data

The data for this articulated is drawn from fieldwork carried out in 2015–2016 in the form of video ethnography. The fieldwork was carried out over the course of a school year (September–June), during which the research team visited the preschool a few days each month. The preschool staff were asked to invite the research team whenever something they considered a tradition was the focus of pedagogical activities. The research team participating in the overall project comprised two researchers with expertise in early childhood education and two researchers with expertise in religious studies. The team members have worked in different constellations during both the fieldwork and the analysis of data.

The preschool group that participated in the activity focused on in this article involved 22 children (aged 2–5 years) and four teachers. The preschool is run in cooperation between the local Lutheran Church and the local municipality and has a so-called religious profile. In practice, the religious profile implies that some of the preschool’s activities, such as
story-telling or singing, involve religious motives. At the same time, the teachers emphasized that the preschool does not teach religion, that being a Christian is not a prerequisite for admission and that the children can choose not to participate in activities that take place in the local church that the preschool group visits on a regular basis. The group of children is diverse in terms of culture, religion, and language. Information about the study was given to the teachers, children and parents, and written approval was obtained from the parents and the teachers. The children were asked to give their oral consent.

The activities relating to Easter took place on two days. The video data analyzed is the recording of the 20.6 min-long performance at the local Lutheran church. The material was transcribed, coded, and thematized with the help of MaxQda, a piece of qualitative analysis software. In the initial phase, the material was sorted under two distinct categories: religious and secular narratives. During the second phase we made use of Smart’s phenomenological model, exploring the different dimensions of the religious content of the performed religious narrative to be able to see which dimensions of religion are used. Finally, we explored how translations and transitions were made between the religious and the secular narratives. At this stage we were able to pose the question of whether the teaching activity (the performance) had the potential to offer educational gifts for the children who participated. In other words, we explored whether the teaching about a tradition involved teaching from religion.

Analysis

The process and the results of the analysis are presented in three layers. The first layer is a thick description, depicting the context and the participants of the performance as well as those parts of the performance that are not analyzed in further detail. The second layer of the analysis illustrates the different dimensions of the two worldviews (religious and secular) intertwined in the performance. The secular worldview, in our understanding, involves those elements of the narrative which relate to the pre-Christian (pagan) and folk aspects of Easter such as celebrating fertility, egg-painting, and egg-hunting. The third layer of the analysis consists of detailed content analysis of one excerpt from the performance. To increase the transparency of the analytical process, the excerpt was divided into smaller units. Through the detailed analysis we show how translations between the religious and secular narratives are made and how the performers balance between teaching about the religious background of Easter and trying to avoid teaching in religion.
The context and the performance

The preschool group was invited, together with other primary school classes, to the local Lutheran Church, which is a large modern building with light and spacious interiors. The decoration is dominated by a painting of Jesus at the front and a wooden boat symbolizing Noah’s Ark at the back. The church’s items such as candles and linen did not occupy a prominent position. In addition to the church’s decoration, there were two tables and a chest placed at the front containing objects required for the performance (Figure 1). One of the tables resembled an Easter garden with two crosses on a hill, a tomb, a table with a chalice and a bread basket, and two figures representing Jesus’s disciples and three figures representing grieving women with flowers.

On the other table there were the secular symbols of Easter: decorated eggs, Easter twigs with colored feathers, a rooster, a porcelain egg with an Easter bunny on the top, and a bunch of daffodils. Behind the tables there were two adults playing different roles: a man known to many of the children as the parish teacher (henceforward PT) and a woman in a chicken costume that covered her body from head to toe (henceforward the chicken). The brown-colored chest was situated in between the two tables. During the play, the chest was opened and the two characters took various objects (a donkey, a piece of bread, Easter twigs with purple feathers on, and a cross) from it that related to the narrative. The play started with the PT holding a mop and asking the audience if they did any “Easter cleaning” at home. He pretends to clean around the religious table when
the chicken comes in singing. The chicken asks one of the adults in the audience why they were there, and the preschool teacher answers that she heard that a curious chicken would be in the church that day, which is why they came. The chicken and the PT then start a discussion about why they were there, with the PT talking about the importance of cleaning before Easter and the chicken being very curious about everything. The play starts with the PT suggesting that they should look into the treasure chest. He opens the chest and the chicken picks up a small purple colored donkey figure. The chicken wonders why the donkey is in the treasure chest, whereupon the PT explains that it is a very special donkey, the one that Jesus rode to Jerusalem on. The chicken sings “Feast, feast, feast in Jerusalem when Jesus rode in on a donkey.” Afterwards, the donkey is placed behind the religious table and the PT takes a piece of bread from the chest, explaining to the chicken that it was a very special piece of bread that Jesus shared with his disciples on his last evening, whereupon the chicken starts talking about her life in the hen garden.

The chicken’s story eventually returns to the Passion narrative when the PT picks up a bunch of twigs decorated with purple feathers from the treasure chest. The chicken says that, according to the rooster in the hen garden, one can wave with the twigs shouting, “Hosanna, hosanna, hurrah, hurrah!,” showing that she has some knowledge about the religious rituals relating to Easter. The chicken’s story is thereby intertwined with the story about the people waving palm leaves and greeting Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem. Holding the Easter twigs in his hand, the PT explains that the purple color of the feathers indicates that one should reflect on because it is used to mark that something big has happened; but he also reminds the audience that when they buy feathers for Easter decorations they should think about buying feathers that have not been plucked from live animals. The PT and the chicken then put the Easter twigs in a vase on the secular table and the chicken asks the PT to tell her more about Jesus, the donkey and the bread they ate at Jesus’s last supper. The PT tells the story of Jesus being captured and crucified. The story of the crucifixion is summarized by the PT in a single sentence, “They nailed him to a cross,” in response to the chicken’s question, “What did they do then?.” A cross that has been taken out of the treasure chest is then placed by the PT on the religious table and the chicken asks again: “Well, what happened then? What happened next?.” The PT explains that Jesus was put into a tomb but that his body was not found there when some women came to decorate the grave three days later, whereupon he emphasizes that this is a story that has been told.

The religious narrative can be seen as a drama in four acts: (1) Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem, (2) his last supper, (3) his death, and (4) the
resurrection. In parallel to the drama framed in religious terms, there are the chicken’s stories that interpret, translate, and at times supplement the religious narrative. At the same time, although the PT narrates the Passion story in its entirety, he distances himself from one of the fundamental dogmas of Christianity: that of Jesus’s resurrection. In this way, although the Passion narrative is performed as a ritual in a church with the help of material artifacts tied to the religious dimensions of Easter (the donkey, bread, and the cross), and also refers to ethical doctrines such as the importance of sharing one’s bread, it thereby covers almost all seven of Smart’s dimensions, which will be discussed in detail bellow.

**Teaching about easter**

Given our empirical focus on the place of religious issues in early childhood education, we considered that Smart’s categories provide a useful general framework for examining the content of what at the first sight appears to be a religious narrative. Nevertheless, although coding those parts of the performance that we identified as religious, we observed that the narrative about Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem, the last supper, his death, and the resurrection runs along the same thematic lines as the secular Easter narrative performed by the Easter chicken.

At that point we chose to apply the same coding scheme to the secular narrative that we applied to the religious one. Table 1 illustrates how the different dimensions, outlined by Smart, appear in the religious and secular narratives. While analyzing the content of the secular and religious narratives, we could also identify both parallels and “translations” made between these two. By translation, we mean the process of creating transitions between the two narratives through reinterpreting certain events. In this section of the article the focus is on how the different dimensions outlined by Smart appear in the religious and secular narratives, whereas in the next section two examples of such translations are analyzed in detail.

The performance of the Easter story may in itself be seen as a ritual. According to Smart, one aspect of the ritual dimension is when a narrative is used as a text for dramatic performances. The thoughtful composition of the storyline indicates that the script of the narrative was carefully constructed in advance with a particular aim to teach about Easter, and the script included intentions and actions that constitute the roles of the two characters. It has also become clear during the analysis that the secular narrative does not stand alone; its function was rather to bring the content of the religious narrative closer to the children’s own experiences of Easter. At the same time, the combination of religious and secular elements contributes to what Smart described as “the abolition of space and time”36.
whereupon the religious story of Jesus’s death and resurrection is intertwined with the narrative about “the fertility of the spring season, to stave off death and darkness as winter draws on.”

In this way, the ritual dimension also interlocks with the narrative dimension of experiencing religion. According to Smart, stories are internal characteristics of all religions because they play an important part in constructing and preserving what is considered the fabric of traditions. One of the functions of religious stories is to provide a script for ritual actions,
whereas another is to explain—among other things—the origins of life, the fate of a person or salvation. At the same time, the function of the rite is to bring to life the script through reconciling thought and action.38

During the performance, parallels are drawn between the religious Easter story describing Jesus’s last days, his death and resurrection, and the secular story of the chicken focusing on the rebirth of nature symbolized by the chicken hatching from her egg. Through two songs sung by the chicken, one of which is about Jesus’s last journey to Jerusalem whereas the other one is about Jesus’s resurrection, the chicken shows that she is familiar with some of the ritual details of the Easter narrative. Singing the (religious) songs together also helped the two actors to merge the secular and religious narratives into the moral of the performance, expressed in terms of hope and belief in the future.

Another salient dimension of the performance is the material one. Although in the ritual and narrative dimensions the focus is on transgressing the boundaries between the secular and religious aspects of the stories, within the material dimension the focus is on keeping a clear boundary between which artifacts belong to the secular narrative and which ones belong to the religious narrative. The material dimension is materialized using the two tables described in the previous section. The artifacts taken from the treasure chest during the performance are placed on either the religious table or the secular table, depending on their function. At the same time, the performance took place in a church, which in itself is a materialization of the religious dimension. The chicken character can be seen as the embodiment of the secular dimension of the performance.

The context of the performance, together with the playful character of the chicken, may also be regarded as the social dimensions of the performance. The church plays a social role in the local area and the audience consisted of children from the local preschools and primary schools. The social dimension in terms of invoking the feeling of togetherness has been further enhanced by the questions asked by the chicken about how the children celebrated Easter, how they decorated their homes and how many eggs they ate. In addition, a small present in form of chocolate eggs was distributed to the children, further enhancing the idea of a community sharing food with one another. The social dimension has been further strengthened by the fact that the secular artifacts taken from the treasure chest during the performance (twigs, feathers and eggs) are easily recognizable by the children because they surround them in their everyday surroundings, both at preschool and within society as a whole.

The idea of sharing was also incorporated into the ethical dimension of the religious narrative when the parish teacher talked about the importance of sharing in relation to Jesus’s last supper with his disciples. Another
ethical dimension was raised in relation to the secular practice of decorating with feathers at Easter. In fact, this was one of the few cases when the PT deviated from the religious narrative and got involved in a discussion with the chicken about feathers, whereupon they made a reference to the ethical discussion about animal rights.

Although the ritual, narrative, materials and social and ethical dimensions were relatively clearly distinguishable in the performance, the emotional dimension was less explicitly expressed and the doctrinal dimension was entirely absent. As far as the emotional dimension is concerned, the chicken did express certain emotions—grief, happiness, joy—in relation to the different parts of the religious narrative, but the attempts to share these emotional experiences with the audience were somewhat lame. At the same time, the performance in its entirety can be seen as “an offer” to share the joy and hopefulness of both secular and religious Easter narratives. As mentioned in relation to the social dimension, the feeling of togetherness is also evoked by the common experience of watching an Easter play together at the local church.

Table 1 shows that of the seven dimensions outlined by Smart, the dogmatic dimension is the only one that we have not found represented in the performance. When it comes to the doctrinal dimension, it is first and foremost the religious narrative that is of interest here and primarily the doctrine of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. This is why the part of the performance that this narrative was told within is analyzed in greater detail below.

Teaching from religion

The religious narrative about Jesus’s death and resurrection is told by the PT in chronological order and in a matter-of-fact way. For example, in connection with Jesus’s crucifixion he said: “In fact, they nailed him to a cross.” Nevertheless, when the narrative came to the story about Jesus’s resurrection, the teacher expressed uncertainty about the truth of the story:

PT: There’s something like … yes, if it’s true, or if it’s really true, or if it’s not true, I do not know. But, the story tells that they put Jesus in a grave. And at that time it (the grave) was a tomb in a cliff. (Meanwhile, the PT shows the tomb, represented by two stones on the religious table.) And then they put a big stone in front of it, like this, so no one would find out that Jesus was gone, and that someone had taken the body (he places a stone in front of the stone that represents the tomb).

Chicken: But you know, I can recognize this. Because you know, before I was born, I was in an egg.

(The PT walks to the secular table, lifts an egg and shows it to the children.)

Chicken: And it was dark, and being within an eggshell is almost like lying in a tomb. And then when I woke up and became alive I had my nice beak, and then I
knocked with it on the shell, so it broke, and then I could come out. And I was so cute, so cute. I was pretty yellow and I was so cute, oh so cute.

PT: Yes, maybe it was like that. And indeed, there were some women who came to the grave first, and would make it nice, and then they looked at the tomb and saw that the great stone had been rolled away. (He rolls away the stone from the front of the other stone.)

Chicken: Oh, how could they do that? It was great!

PT: I do not know. But it is told that it was rolled away, and that the grave was empty.

This excerpt exemplifies two notable characteristics of the performance: the PT emphasizing that the religious narrative is “nothing more” than a story and the chicken’s “translation” of the religious narrative into a secular one while keeping the moral of the story intact. The PT (and the writers of the script of the play) seem to consider the dogmatic dimension of the religious narrative as the problematic aspect of what is considered religion. In other words, what we see here is a narrow understanding that equates religion with the dogmatic dimension of religion. In this understanding of religion, as long as believing in religious dogmas is avoided, preschools and schools are not dealing with teaching in religion. Thus, the PT distancing himself from faith in the dogma about Jesus’s resurrection can be seen as a way of dealing with the dilemma of how to pass on a religious narrative, that is, how to teach about religion while avoiding teaching in religion.

The other storyline in this excerpt is the one told by the chicken, which is a parallel to Jesus’s presumed experiences of lying in and coming out of the tomb. Hatching is described as waking up, becoming alive, and coming out of the darkness. Thus, teaching about the Easter tradition is done by drawing a parallel between the secular and religious narratives connected to Easter, whereupon the translation between the common message of the narratives offers a possibility to reflect on the continuity of life. Drawing a parallel between Jesus’s resurrection and hatching from an egg can be seen both as a trivialization of the religious narrative and as an attempt to bring the religious narrative closer to the children’s own experiences and imaginary. Nevertheless, as it is not obvious which version of the narrative the children are more familiar with, the translation work may be seen as a two-way process: the religious narrative explaining the secular one and vice versa. That the chicken is also familiar with the religious narrative is made obvious in the closing of the performance:

Chicken: But do you know what, do you know what came to my mind? My mother who is very clever and who teaches me … she’s singing to me all the time. She is a
real songbird. And now I understand that all the songs she sang to me, that’s her way of teaching me a lot of things. I actually know a song that’s about what you’ve been telling us here. (Pointing at the religious table.) Shall I sing it to you?

PT: Yes, it’s okay.

Chicken: (Bursts into song) Jesus has risen, Jesus has come to see that day, see the stone is gone, the grave is empty, imagine what a day, now I want to tell others about this lovely day.

Chicken: (looking at the PT) Will you help me now?

PT: Okay.

Chicken and the PT: (Singing.) Jesus has risen, Jesus has risen, on any day, see the stone is gone, the grave is empty, imagine what a day, now I want to tell others about this lovely day: Jesus has risen!

PT: That was great!

Chicken: It just fits in this context.

The chicken’s utterance reveals that she has learned a song from her mother that she can put into a wider context through the PT’s story about Jesus. Thereupon the chicken starts singing a song that is very similar to an Eastern hymn well known among Lutherans in Sweden. As the chicken explained, she has picked up bits and pieces of the religious narrative, in the form of songs, from her mother, who used to sing these songs to her but did not explain the context of them. In this way, the chicken describes a pattern many children may be familiar with when they recognize a song or a part of a story but (may) need help placing it into a wider context. The narrative strategy used here can be also seen as yet another translation, but in this case it is the religious narrative, in the form of the song sung here, that explains the secular one about why the chicken’s mother taught her to sing this particular song. The last statement in this excerpt—“it just fits in this context”—is a way of intertwining the chicken’s mostly secular narrative with the religious one. This is also the end point of the religious narrative, while the secular one continues:

Chicken: But you, so, now I’ve sung to you so much, I want some reward for this.

PT: Okay then.

Chicken: Don’t you think I’ll get a little reward for this? (The chicken asks the children.)

The kids: Yes!
Chicken: I have to get something because I’ve been here and learned a lot of things. (In the meantime, the PT has brought a large half cardboard Easter egg filled with chocolate eggs.)

PT: Here you will get an egg for example. (Offers the chicken a chocolate egg.) Or don’t you want eggs?

Chicken: Who made these eggs?

PT: It’s a secret.

The chicken wants a reward for learning a lot of things, referring to the religious narrative, whereupon the PT offers her a chocolate egg from a big eggshell made of cardboard. Distributing sweets among the children can be seen as symbolic act referring back to the moral of the story about Jesus’s last supper, and as the modern articulation of this act that most children recognize because they associate Easter with eating sweets. Thereafter the performance moves on to its last phase, where all the children in the audience get a chocolate egg as a reward, presumably because, like the chicken, they were there and had learned a lot.

Discussion

At the beginning of this article we raised the question of how and why the secular and religious narratives are intertwined in a play about Easter performed in a church. The analysis shows that the dual educational aim of the performance was to teach children about Jesus’s death and resurrection, and about why Easter is celebrated. This educational aim materialized through interweaving the religious and secular narratives about Easter celebrations. The chicken’s reflection on her own learning reveals an expectation that the children in the audience will also have learned “a lot of things” from participating in the event. This article does not answer the question of whether and how much the children in the audience actually learned.

What we can conclude from the analysis is that whether it is religion or a cultural tradition that is taught through the performance depends on how the concept of religion is defined. The analysis shows that the characters of the performance themselves understood religion as the doctrine of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. This narrow understanding of religion enabled them indirectly to teach about the traditions and narratives surrounding Easter while avoiding teaching religion as a belief system. Nevertheless, as shown in the analysis, if we extend the definition of religion, using Smart’s categories, and look at how the other dimensions of religion are dealt with, there is no clear-cut distinction between teaching about religion and the transmission of cultural norms.
Thus, the analysis reveals that the performance could be used as a positive example of how teaching about religion in an educational context can be staged. At the same time, given that our theoretical perspective was based on Grimmitt’s ideas about educational values in relation to religious values, we find the results of the analysis relevant in terms of answering the question of what kind of educational gifts the content of the performance had the capacity to give. As we highlight in the analysis, through translating between the secular and religious narratives the play offered an opportunity to contemplate existential issues such as the continuity of life. At the same time, the PT’s assertion that he did not know whether or not the story about Jesus’s resurrection was true can be also interpreted as an educational gift, because it allows for different interpretations of a Christian religious dogma. The children watching the play were given the possibility to interpret the story based on their own beliefs. Thereby, while the story could be interpreted differently by believing Christian children than by non-believing children or by children with a different faith, it offered an educational gift to all of them in terms of teaching about why Easter is celebrated. Another educational gift offered by the play was the possibility to reflect on the moral of getting a reward for hard work, as expressed in the final part of the performance when the chicken and the children got a reward for learning from the performance. In this case the educational gift materialized in a real gift in the form of a chocolate egg.

All in all, we can conclude that even if the initial aim was to teach children about religion through the translation work between the religious and secular narratives, the performance also offered possibilities to learn from religion. At the same time, it is also important to highlight that this was achieved through the involvement of two “experts” who, unlike the great majority of Swedish preschool teachers, have an education in religious studies and the competence to employ worldview sensitivity. Their way of working with the religious and secular narratives that surround Easter constitutes an example of the fruitfulness of worldview sensitivity, that is the ability to work inclusively with both religious and nonreligious worldviews, for teaching about and teaching from religion.

Notes
1. Swedish National Agency for Education, “PM - Barn och personal i förskolan hösten 2016 [Memo – Children and staff at preschool, autumn 2016],” https://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_xurl_=%2F%2Fwww5.skolverket.se%2Fwtpub%2Fsas%2Fpubbok%2Fsaspubext%2Ftrycksak%2F
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