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A secular Advent. waiting for Christmas in Swedish preschools

Tünde Puskás and Anita Andersson

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Norrköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Swedish preschool education is, by law, non-confessional. Yet, it is also an educational context within which most children aged 1–5 encounter traditions that carry Christian connotations. This paper explores how two Swedish preschools maintain a balance between keeping education non-confessional and paying attention to the traditions that are associated with the preparation for and celebration of Christmas – Advent. The data consist of ten videotaped observations from two preschools. The data was thematised with the help of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religious and secular worldviews. This way, we could show that the different traditions the two preschools were engaged in during the four weeks before Christmas contributed to a banal reproduction of a holiday season with roots in Lutheran Christianity. At the same time, the preschools contributed to a (re)production of traditions that evoke a national imaginery. Our results show that Advent in Swedish preschools is characterised as a non-confessional task for the institution. Thus, the principle of non-confessionality lives side by side with a banal national religion. Thereby, the Swedish preschool plays an integral part in the banal reproduction of a Swedishness that includes Lutheran Christianity.

KEYWORDS

Swedish preschool education; advent; banal religion; banal nationalism; dimensions of worldviews

Introduction

This article examines how Advent is enacted and staged in two Swedish preschools that operate in a national context that has been described as one of the most secular in the world (Palm and Trost 2000). This paper contributes to previous research on how educational institutions contribute to the reproduction of religious traditions framed in national terms (Reimers 2020; Lappalainen 2006, 2009). This study also extends our previous studies which have explored how preschool practitioners negotiate the meaning of cultural traditions celebrated in Swedish preschools (Puskás and Andersson 2017), implement and reflect on the curricular task of transmitting a cultural heritage between generations (2018), and achieve a balance between keeping education non-confessional and teaching about a tradition with religious roots (2021).

In past decades, Sweden has moved from a linguistically (Swedish) and religiously (Christian Lutheran) homogeneous society to a multicultural, multilingual and and multireligious society where roughly one quarter of preschool children have a migrant background (Skolverket 2021). At the same time, Sweden, where the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Sweden was a state church until 2000, is secularised in terms of declining membership rates in religious communities, as well as in terms of its policy of non-confessional education. Nevertheless, in spite of growing secularisation and increasing religious plurality, Christmas remains a public holiday that a large portion of the society participate in

CONTACT Tünde Puskás tunde.puskas@liu.se Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, SE-602 17 Norrköping, Sweden

(Swahn 2012; Strömberg 2017). Moreover, the Christmas season is not merely coterminous with the domestic setting and the public holidays of the 25th and 26th of December – instead, it extends to the four weeks preceding Christmas that in the Christian calendar demarcate Advent.

As in many other Western societies, Advent in Sweden is a period of hopeful waiting interpreted in both religious and non-religious terms (Gasparini 1995). For some, Advent represents a period of preparation for the commemoration of Christ's incarnation; for others, it involves waiting for gifts or for the family gathering around a Christmas tree or a meal. Regardless of what one is waiting for, Advent in Swedish preschools is made into a collective experience, and most children in Sweden get involved in Christmas preparations from an early age. Yet, very little is known about how and why Advent is staged in preschools which are, according to the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) and the Curriculum for the Preschool (Skolverket 2018), non-confessional in the sense that teaching should be neutral in relation to different religions. Advent can be seen both in terms of waiting for a Christian holiday and as an expression of anticipation prior to a national public holiday. Thus, it is of interest to explore how religion and nationalism intersect in those parts of cultural heritage that are staged in Swedish preschools throughout December.

Theoretically, this paper is informed by Ninian Smart's (1987) idea of how the modern Western world's religious and secular ideologies can, as human worldviews, be studied from the same analytical framework. In addition we use the twin concepts banal religion and banal nationalism, both referring to the banality of reproduction through extensively used but rarely noticeable symbols that constantly remind individuals about their belonging to a certain (religious or/and national) community (Billig 1995). Given this background, the aim of this paper is twofold: to describe how Advent is done in Swedish preschools and to explore how the Christian religious worldview associated with Advent interacts with the national worldview.

The paper is organised as follows: in the background section there is a short description of Swedish early childhood education and its curricular task as regards cultural socialisation. The background section also contains a description of the main results of previous research within this field. The theoretical framework and concepts section describes the analytical lenses employed in the analysis. In the data and methodology section we explain how the data were collected and which methodological considerations were taken into account. The findings section is organised with the help of descriptors that draw on Ninian Smart's (1997) theoretical model for analysing worldviews. The paper's main results are summarised in the discussion section. Finally, the conclusions highlight the main contributions of the study.

Background

In this section, we briefly describe the Swedish early childhood education that is the first stage of the the Swedish school system. In Sweden, over 85% of children between one and five years old (ca half a million of country's ten million inhabitants) are enrolled in early childhood education. Among children between three and five years, the rate of enrolment is even higher, around 95% (Skolverket 2021). In this text, we refer to those working with children in Swedish preschools as preschool practitioners, regardless of whether they are preschool teachers with university educations or child-minders with vocational training, as they work in teams and are expected to take part in all tasks.[1]

All preschools in Sweden are public preschools in the sense that they are publicly funded, follow the national preschool curriculum and are subject to the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800). The majority of preschools are run by municipalities, but there are also preschools run by private actors, religious organisations and commercial enterprises. The Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) stipulates that education in Swedish schools and preschools shall be non-confessional. This statement have been included in the revised preschool curriculum (Skolverket 2018) according to which children in preschools 'should not be unilaterally influences in favour of one or other point of view' and for this reasons education should be 'objective, comprehensive and non-confessional'. (Skolverket 2018, 2) The Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) 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' (SFS 2010:800: chapter 1, §3). The distinction between education and teaching is important because while all preschools (regardless of who runs them) follow the same preschool curriculum, the Education Act states that preschools run by religious organisations may include confessional elements. Nevertheless, at the preschool level, the difference between teaching and education is not always clear-cut. This is probably why the provisions of the Educational Act regarding non-confessional education in preschools are specified in legal advice issued by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2012). According to this document, educational activities associated with religion can take place in all Swedish preschools as long as they are designed with an emphasis on traditions, solemnity, and togetherness, and do not involve prayers, blessing, or creed (Skolverket 2012). Thus, this document indicates that in the case of traditions that go back generations certain religious elements, such as singing particular anthems at particular ceremonies or celebrating Advent, are permitted because they are regarded as part of the national cultural heritage.

According to the curriculum, preschool practitioners are given the task of 'transferring' a cultural heritage, defined in terms of 'values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next' (Skolverket 2018, 9). Religion is not mentioned as an aspect of the cultural heritage to be transferred. However, as two of the major public holidays (Easter, Christmas) in Sweden are tied to Lutheran Christianity, several of the traditions Swedish preschools pay considerable attention to have Christian roots. At the same time, research shows that religious traditions embedded in the Swedish national identity and culture have, in the face of increasing religious plurality, become more visible (Berglund 2013; Flensner 2017).

Previous research shows that the Swedish preschool is a national institution within which the nation is reproduced through everyday mundane practice and rituals (Ehn 1983; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995; Björk-Willén, Gruber, and Puskás 2013). It has been also shown that the distinction between Swedish cultural heritage and the Christian Lutheran connotation of holidays in Swedish preschools is superficial – while preschool teachers claim to celebrate Christmas without expressing religion, they still introduce children to Christian Lutheran practices (Reimers 2020). This is in line with research conducted in Finnish preschools that shows that religiously motivated traditions of the majority are often 'nationalized' – i.e. are discussed in terms of national traditions rather than as religious ones, but are still celebrated (Lappalainen 2006, 2009).

Theoretical frameworks and concepts

The question of how Advent is enacted and staged in Swedish educational institutions gains its relevance from the sociology of religion and from nationalism research (Schnabel and Hjerm 2014). Collective identities in Western nation states are based both on the principles of democracy, equality and human rights as well as in terms of the historical, linguistic and religious traditions of the majority population (Taylor 2010). This implies that national identities perceived as secular by those who belong to the majority may nonetheless have religious undertones that become visible in contact with other religious affiliations (Taylor 2010). It has, furthermore, been argued that nationalism is not a distinctively secular phenomenon – instead, ways of talking about religion and nation often intertwine (Brubaker 2012). This is supported by earlier research showing that, in spite of the official claim that the Swedish educational system is neutral and objective, 'from an outside perspective … Sweden is a society that can be described as a society marinated in Lutheran Christianity, officially claiming to have washed away that marinade, but having problems in admitting that the taste abides' (Berglund 2013, 181). Whether the customs and rituals connected to Advent in Swedish preschools are religious or national is here treated as an empirical question. However, we assume that the traditions staged in preschools contribute to a 'banal reproduction' of

the worldviews of the majority population. The subtle nationalism that Billig (1995) conceptualises as banal includes symbols, rituals and holidays, all of which are also utilised in religious practices. The banality of reproduction is thus pervasive in the realm of both religious and national practices the function of which, in a Durkheiminian sense, is to strengthen the bonds attaching individuals to religious or national communities (Durkheim 1965).

The banality of reproduction has primarily been adressed at the theoretical level in nationalism studies. According to the theory of banal nationalism Billig (1995), we are constantly reminded of nationhood through routine everyday habits and everyday words (such as *we, our, here, home*) 'which take nations for granted, and which, in so doing enhabit them' (Billig 1995, 93). The concept of banal religion draws on the concept of banal nationalism. Banal religion is thus understood here as the unreflected use of formerly explicit religious symbols and practices which are constantly perpetuated 'in embodied habits of social life' (Billig 1995, 8). Banal religion refers to familiar symbols and practices that are not necessarily seen as expressions of Christianity or of a religion at large, but that are perceived by many people as part of their cultural heritage (Hjarvard 2008). At the same time, the label 'banal' should not be interpreted as meaning that these cultural practices are less important or irrelevant. They are banal in the sense that 'their religious meanings may travel unnoticed and can be evoked independently of larger religious texts or institutions' (Hjarvard 2008, 8). This is why, applied as analytical lenses, the concepts of banal religion and banal nationalism may shed light on how religious and national elements intertwine in the traditions connected to Advent.

Another solution for creating a common theoretical platform for studying religion and nationalism together has been offered by Ninian Smart, who uses the concept of worldview "to cover both traditionally religious systems of belief and practice and secular systems of similar nature (Smart 1987, 11). He also asserts that 'nationalism functions like a religion' (69) and has 'many of the appurtenances of a religion' (Smart 1998, 69); thus the various dimensions of religion (presented in the methodological section of this paper) are applicable even to nationalism. We make us of Smart's multidimensional model to operationalise the way religious and national worldviews map onto each. In more concrete terms, in the analysis we outline how the various dimensions of the Lutheran Christian religion intertwine with the dimensions of a national worldview.

Data and methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from fieldwork carried out in 2015 in the form of video observations at two preschools. Information about the study was given to the preschool practitioners, children and parents, and written approval was obtained from the parents and the practitioners. The children were asked to give verbal consent. In the study, the preschool groups, teachers and children are given fictitious names. The preschool groups are called Panda and Raven. Preschool group Raven, which is part of a municipal preschool, comprised nineteen children (three to five years old) and four practitioners. The child group was diverse in terms of culture, religion and language. Some came from secular homes, while others came from Christian or Muslim ones.

Preschool group Panda had twenty-two children (two to five years old) and four practitioners. The preschool is run jointly by the Lutheran Church and the local municipality, and has a religious profile. Some of the preschool's activities, such as story-telling or singing, involved Lutheran Christian elements. At the same time, the practitioners emphasised that the preschool does not teach religion, being Christian is not a prerequisite for admission, and the children can choose not to participate in the regular activities that take place in the local church. The child group was diverse in terms of culture, religion and language but, given the preschool's religious profile, Lutheran Christianity was the most visible religion. We have not asked the practitioners about their religiosity, but during side talks one of them expressed concerns over the balance between being religious privately and acting professionally in a non-confessional educational institution.

The research team 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 both during the fieldwork and the analysis of data. Two from the team visited both preschools during a few days every month between August 2015 and July 2016. The frequency of the visits was determined by the preschool staff, who were asked to invite the researchers each time they planned an activity related to what they perceived as a tradition. The practitioners were asked to work as ususal and invite the researchers when it suited them. What was perceived as a tradition by the preschool teachers varied a lot. The researchers were invited to an annual running competition, birthday celebrations as well as to several traditions tied to Lutheran Christian holidays.

We do not know to what extent the preschool practitioner's awareness about the formal regulations influenced their practice, but we assume that our repeated visits made them feel comfortable with our presence. We worked with one handheld camera and two mounted GoPro cameras. 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 each time we visited the preschools. According to a post-fieldwork interview with practitioners at both preschools, they became accustomed to the disturbance caused by our presence. As with other researchers working with video ethnography in educational contexts, we found that our presence was experienced as intrusive during our first visits, but that the participants became more and more accustomed to it, and eventually regarded them as a natural part of the environment (Pole and Morrison 2003).

The most frequent visits took place between 30 November and 22 December 2015 as during this time period the preschools were engaged in several different activities associated with the preparations for Christmas. The waiting period started with lighting the first Advent candle on Monday after the first Sunday of Advent. Three more visits were paid to both preschools in December, all filled with activities related to Christmas. Even though we were not in the preschools every day during our eight visits, we observed activities that were repeated on a daily or a weekly basis. The material analysed for this paper comprises 124 minutes of video data from Raven and 126 minutes of video material from Panda.

The data was coded with the help of the qualitative analysis software MaxQda. At the first stage of the analysis, we coded the material using Smart's phenomenological model (1999) in which he identified the following dimensions of worldviews: (1) the ritual dimension, referring to the practices and rituals through which individuals develop spiritual awareness and ethical insight, and through which communities re-enact stories to perform their beliefs through action (2) the experiential and emotional dimension, referring to the feelings evoked by rituals such as prayer and worship and (3) the emotional experiences related to religious and secular practices – the narrative or mythic dimension – referring to the myths, images and stories which pass between generations; (4) the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, referring to a philosophy or system of doctrines that are systematically formulated and constitute an intellectually coherent whole; (5) the ethical and legal dimension, focusing on formal and informal, written or orally transmitted laws, regulations and behavioural precepts for conduct which the followers are expected to adopt; (6) the social and institutional dimension, referring to the social organisation and (7) the material dimension, referring to places and objects that are considered sacred.

Each dimension was remade into a descriptor that signifies a connection between Smart's theoretical concepts and everyday preschool practice. During the coding procedure, we were struck by the banality of the reproduction and repetition of certain patterns and practices related to Advent. This is why, at the next stage of the analysis, we chose to explore whether and how the different dimensions of Advent reflect banal, ingrained modes of waiting for Christmas. Consequently, the second stage of the analysis was inspired by a theoretical interest in the processes linked to the banal reproduction of 'a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices' (Billig 1995, 7) associated with how Advent is celebrated in Sweden. In the following section, we present the material through the lens of Smart's (1999) dimensions described above and

show how Smart's model, 'cross-fertilized' with the theory on banal reproduction, makes the workings of banal religion and banal nationalism visible. The section 'results' is organised around the descriptors used at the first stage of the analysis, but our interpretations use the concepts of banal nationalism and banal religion.

Findings

The materiality of Advent

The period of Advent was materially present in the two preschools in several ways. It was marked by decorations that are specific to a special time period and to a national context. The children and their guardians met Advent already in the preschools' entrance halls. Both preschools were decorated with Christmas trees, Christmas lights, Advent stars, straw figures, angels, pixies and gnomes and bits of Christmas craft made by the children. Homemade Advent calendars decorated the walls, and an Advent wreath with four candles was placed on a sideboard. The children were surrounded by Advent decorations in each and every room, and were engaged in making Christmas decorations on several occasions. Thus, the decorations that build excitement in the days leading up to Christmas were everywhere and could not go unnoticed.

Advent in the two preschools was a miniature representation of societal anticipation for Christmas to come. The decorations mirrored the decorations that mark the period of Advent both in public spaces and in private homes. In Sweden, starting from the first Sunday of Advent, the streets are decorated with a plethora of tinsel garlands that hang from building to building, and with lights and stars. The shops are full of cardboard boxes with paper doors revealing cartoons or chocolates, as well as customised calendars that feature popular gifts such as toys and cosmetics. Therefore, the artefacts staged in the preschools provide a common framework for belonging in the sense that those who consume the same materiality become participants in a common waiting for Christmas that can be interpreted in national or religious terms, or both (Billig 1995). This waiting is materialised both within a broader national context and within the preschool context.

The rituals of Advent

The rituals of Advent were regularly recurring occasions. We have observed both weekly rituals (twice) and daily rituals (three times) in both preschools. In addition, during our visits, we discussed the content of these rituals with the practitioners. A weekly ritual in both preschools was the lighting of the Advent candles. In the two preschools we followed, Advent candles were lit at the beginning of each week starting four weeks before Christmas, without any reference to the Christian narrative. Instead, the preschool teachers recited a poem that ties the candles to the joys of Advent in Sweden: waiting for Lucia, preparing gingerbread and saffron buns and the positive emotions associated with the anticipation of Christmas Eve.

A daily ritual in both preschools was the opening of Advent calendars. The preparations for Advent started with the preschool practitioners producing different kinds of Advent calendars, thereby indicating that the waiting for Christmas was to begin. In Panda the windows of a self-made calendar were made of small parcels, while in Raven they made use of several calendars one of which was a book-calendar with a small booklet behind every number. Every day, a different child could open the window of the day and take home the book that was behind it. This way, the ritual took on a social function, and became a link between the preschool and the children's homes. The gift-giving ritual has also been described as a means through which social and societal values are communicated (Sherry 1983). In this case, it is the tradition of giving Christmas presents to loved ones, as well as to friends, classmates and children in general, that is brought into play through the Advent calendar. Thereby, all children, regardless of whether they celebrated Christmas at home or not, became involved in the tradition of gift-giving. The very act of gift giving could be interpreted as

an expression of a banal religion. For Christians, the act of giving symbolises the gifts the newborn Jesus was given by the three wise men (Contant 1925). However, in the preschool context, there were no religious narratives attached to the ritual and as such it was practiced as an articulation of national Christmas traditions and consumerism. Therefore, it can be also seen as an articulation of banal nationalism.

Another calendar used in one of the preschools was connected to the Advent calendar shown on television. The Swedish public service calendar is a tradition in itself. Every year, a story in 24 episodes is shown by the Swedish public service broadcaster SVT. The children and the preschool practitioners watched the daily episode of the Christmas calendar together. This way, the national celebration of Advent, marked by a public service production that has been known and discussed in each layer of society since the 1960s,[2] became embedded in everyday preschool practice. The annual Advent calendar programme, whose episodes are broadcast every day during Advent on national public service TV, has nearly three million followers, which constitutes thirty percent of the population (Erlandsson 2017).The children in Panda got involved in a national ritual of watching the same show as millions of Swedes.

The social Advent

St. Lucia is an annual ritual that can be seen both as a ritual performance and as a social event. The ritual dimensions of Lucia were given special attention in both preschools in terms of how much time they invested in training for the Lucia performance. During the first two weeks in December, children in both preschools participated in singing activities, the purpose of which was to be able to perform the Lucia tradition for their parents.

The Lucia celebration in both preschools was organised as a social event in the sense that the childrens' closest relatives were invited to watch the the Lucia procession that was followed by coffee drinking. We were invited to the Lucia celebrations of both preschools, and prior to the event for the parents, we also observed the preparations for them on two occasions in both schools. Most of the girls wore a white robe, a red sash and a crown with electric candles in a wreath on their heads, and carried a candle. Other children were dressed as pixies, in an outfit consisting of red trousers, a red shirt with a belt, and a red cap, or as gingerbread figures in brown costumes. The children in both preschools sang the Lucia song and a collection of Christmas songs. In Panda, the repertoire included two Christian songs. After the singing was finished, the parents were treated to coffee, traditional saffron buns and gingerbread. Involving the parents in the Lucia ritual is very common in Swedish preschools, and is both a way of making the waiting for Christmas into a social event and a strategy to get the parents interested in the preschool's pedagogical activities (Puskás 2016). The preschool thereby appears as an institution that contributes to the (re)construction of a collective experience of Advent. Consequently, the Lucia ritual can be seen as embodied habits of social life representing 'doing' Advent in a Swedish way. Thus, the social dimension of Advent can be seen as a reminder of belonging to a certain national culture (Puskás 2016).

Lucia is not simply a preschool event. It is also celebrated at all levels of the society. A Lucia is crowned in most cities and schools, and also at the national level. A tradition since the 1950s has been to broadcast Lucia-morning on Swedish public service television. The broadcasted Lucia-morning takes usually place in a churchor – occasionally – a castle or mansion, providing a historical framework to the Lucia tradition (SVT 2019). It is an approximately one-hour program about the Lucia procession, seen by approximately one million viewers (Dagen 2020) Thus, the Lucia tradition can be seen as an example of flagging the nation (Billig 1995) in the sense that taking part in the tradition is reminder of national belonging that includes elements of Christianity, such as the reference to a saint. Thereby, banal religion becomes an integral part of the national culture that encompasses both religious and secular discourses (Lied 2012) that preschool children and their families are included in.

The narratives of Advent

The narrative dimension of Advent were represented in both preschools through the Christmas story. In the preschool with a religious profile, the story about Jesus's birth was dramatised by one of the preschool teachers with the help of a nativity scene including a reproduction of the stable in Bethlehem with animals and the principal characters of the Christmas story: Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus in a manger. The story was told in a matter in fact way: a woman called Maria was pregnant when she arrived in the city of Bethlehem where she gave birth to a baby named Jesus in a stable. A few shepherds were told by an angel that Jesus had been born, and they went to visit the newborn. That Christmas is celebrated as a reminder of the birth of Jesus was not mentioned. Thus, the preschool teacher did not make any direct connection between the religious doctrine of salvation, the story she told and the upcoming holiday.

In Raven, the nativity story was never told, but during a circle time discussion about why Christmas was celebrated, one of the preschool teachers declared that 'we celebrate Christmas because it's Jesus's birthday' (Puskás and Andersson 2017). The identity of Jesus was not explained in any of the preschools. Thus, the nativity story was both told and not told. The children in both preschools were given smaller or bigger fragments of the story, but in none of the preschools did the practitioners make a connection between the religious narrative and the upcoming holiday. Thereby, we may conclude that the children in both contexts were left with fragmentary knowledge as far as the religious narrative is concerned. This can be interpreted as a form of banal religion, where the religious elements of Christmas were flagged but not explained. In turn, the practitioners' avoidance of the religious doctrine can be explained by the requirement of non-confessional teaching, as well as the understanding that the practices and rituals that surround Christmas in Sweden are perceived in national terms.

The emotional Advent

The emotional dimension was present in both preschools in a subtle form during the entire period of Advent. The sounds and smells of Christmas moved into the preschool in the beginning of December. In the morning, the children were met by Christmas music and Christmas lights. They got involved in baking gingerbread and saffran buns. They sang Christmas songs and did Christmas crafts. There was a joyful and spiritual expectation present in both preschool groups in the anticipation of and preparation for Christmas. The daily, weekly and yearly rituals contributed to an experience of magic by repetition. The cultural and social meaning of waiting for Christmas was emphasised by a 'conspicuous cluster of symbolic and practical acts' (Caplow 1982, 383) that were mirrored in the society at large. The preschools participated thereby in a national Advent in the sense of a waiting for Christmas framed in national terms.

The ethical Advent

Advent was also utilised as an occasion for addressing ethical issues in both preschools. In Panda, the story about a girl call Kajsa Kavat was dramatised by the preschool practitioners. Kajsa Kavat is a character created by Astrid Lindgren, one of Sweden's most famous children's authors. The story nostalgically evokes a bygone age. Kajsa is a little girl who lives with her grandmother, who has a broken leg. It is Kajsa who sells the peppermint drops for her grandmother at the Christmas market, cooks a full Christmas dinner and makes Christmas 'happen'. The story evokes the morality of helpfulness as well as the magic of Christmas. In a similar vein, in Raven, the teachers made use of an Advent calender consisting of a big tree with an ethical virtue as each leaf. Thus, every day during Advent, the children were asked to act out a virtue. The emphasis on fundamental values such as being nice to each other corresponds to what is formulated in the national curriculum for preschool learning (Löfdahl

and Hägglund 2006) as well as with the Christian ethic of loving one's neighbour as oneself. The ethical Advent calender was also an expression of how traditions can be exploited for pedagogical purposes. An interplay was thereby created between ethical questions and the anticipation of Christmas.

The doctrinal Advent

The doctrinal dimension underpins and systematises the narratives associated with religion. In our material, we found only one example of the doctrinal dimension, as the narratives related to Jesus' birth or to the Christian religion at large were not explicitly tied to Christian dogma. Advent was not depicted as a commemoration of the waiting for the arrival of Jesus (as in the Swedish Church), but as a period of waiting for Christmas. Nevertheless, the nationally framed celebration of Advent was challenged in the preschool with a religious profile, where the repertoire of songs sung at Lucia included two songs with explicitly religious content. The children and the preschool staff sang 'Christ is in front of me, behind me, over me and under me, Christ is with me, inside me all around' and a psalm (No. 837) from the 1990s (Den svenska psalmboken 2003) about God lighting a star after the fourth Advent candle has been lit. The texts of the songs can be interpreted as doctrinal, as they express belief in God's existence. Nevertheless, the traditions associated with Advent go back generations. Singing religious anthems is, therefore, in accordance with the legal advice published by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2012), because they are seen as part of the national cultural heritage. The Agency legitimises thereby the use of religious songs in teaching about traditions framed as national rather than religious traditions. Thus, at the national level, singing religious psalms is not seen as as a doctrinal practice but rather as flagging what we can call a banal, nationally sanctioned, religion.

Discussion

The analysis of the ethnographic material collected during the four weeks that preceed Christmas shows that the Advent season – as a time of rituals, celebration and anticipation – is a living tradition in Swedish preschool practice. Smart's multidimensional model has helped us delineate not only the seven dimensions of the two preschools' Advent practices, but also how the national and religious worldviews are intertwined in them in the sense that the preschools 'nationalize' a Christian tradition.

The unreflective use of religious symbols and practices is not seen by the preschool practitioners as an expression of Lutheran Christianity or religion at large, but rather as part of the Swedish cultural heritage that the preschool is obliged to transfer from one generation to another. The cultural heritage that is constructed is a complex amalgam comprising ritual, narrative, ethical, dogmatic, social, material and emotional dimensions of Advent, which for Christians is a religious season. The workings of Advent seem to be so familiar that they are not noticed as religious. However, Advent is itself a religious season, the content of which is constructed and reconstructed through extensively used and noticeable symbols that constantly remind individuals about being part of a community who share Advent as part of their national cultural heritage. In this sense, doing Advent in preschools can be seen as an expression for both banal religion and banal nationalism.

Advent, as it is celebrated in preschools, is neither entirely religious or entirely secular. It can instead be interpreted as an expression of banal religion in a secularised country, and of banal nationalism in a country with Lutheran Christian origins. As we have shown in the analysis, the different dimensions of preschool practices orchestrated during the four weeks of Advent mirror and resonate with the societal values and ideals located at the intersections between flagging the nation and flagging Lutheran Christian traditions. The familiar symbols

and practices, such as the Lucia tradition or the lighting of the Advent candles, are expressions of banal religion. They are banal in the sense that their religious meanings are evoked independently of larger religious institutions. At the national level, the question of whether a tradition with Christian connotations can continue to be part of non-confessional education has been raised (Nöjd 2014; Förskolan. 2016), but it has been argued that Lucia ought to be seen as a national and not a religious tradition (Ekström and Aggebo 2012).

Earlier research (Ehn 1983; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995; Björk-Willén, Gruber, and Puskás 2013) has shown that the Swedish preschool is a context within which the nation is reproduced through everyday mundane practice and rituals. These studies did not consider religion as an aspect of Swedishness. Studies from Finland (Lappalainen 2006, 2009) have shown that religiously motivated traditions of the Lutheran Christian majority tend to be nationalised in the sense that they are treated as national (Finnish), rather than as religious traditions. In this study, we have shown that Advent in Swedish preschools is not free from religious considerations, but is adapted to the non-confessional task of the institution. This can be treated as an example of how principle of non-confessionality lives side by side with a banal national religion in Swedish preschools. Therefore, the Swedish preschool plays an integral part in the banal reproduction of a nation that involves Lutheran Christianity.

The preschool is a context within which societal ideologies and macro processes are reflected in everyday practice. While the Education Act declares that teaching ought to be non-confessional the preschool curriculum gives to preschool practitioners the task of passing on a cultural heritage parts of which have Christian roots. The Swedish preschool is a national institution within which the nation is reproduced through everyday routines and rituals (Ehn 1983; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995). At the policy level, this banal nationalism is reflected in a curriculum that gives preschool educators the task of transmitting 'values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next' (Skolverket 2018, 5). In this paper we have shown that the transmission of rituals associated with Advent traditions can be interpreted both in national and in religious terms. The religiosity that comes into sight is a banal religiosity, an unreflected usage of formerly explicit religious symbols and practices that are not seen as expressions of Christianity or of a religion at large, but rather as part of a cultural heritage to be transferred from one generation to another.

Conclusion

While, according to the official claim, Sweden is a secular society, Lutheran Christianity remains a significant element of a Swedish national identity, as the whole society is marinated in Lutheran Christianity (Berglund 2013). Based on the example of how Advent traditions are practiced in two Swedish preschools, we may conclude that unreflected Lutheran Christianity is ingrained in the ways of socialising young children into a national community. On the one hand, the national framing of a Christian holiday can be interpreted as an inclusionary practice that makes celebrating Advent possible for almost all children regardless cultural background. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a troublesome practice because it does not take into account the fact that almost one fourth of the children in today's Swedish preschools have non-Christian backgrounds, and many of them do not celebrate Advent in their homes. Nevertheless, the socialisation of young children into cultural membership involves a silent yet lived experience of Christian Lutheran traditions framed in national terms. As the preschool is the first stage of the Swedish educational system, the ways this educational institution attends to society's Christian Lutheran traditions plays a role for how future generations relate to the country's cultural and religious heritage.

Notes

1. According to national statistics roughly forty percent of the practitioners are preschool teachers, 30% child-minders and 30% have no relevant education for working within early childhood education. https://www.jmftal.artisan.se/databas.aspx?sf=dh&hg=L0&vg=Personal&sy=0&varid=145&varid=151&varid=148&varid=186&varid=190&varid=188&varid=144&varid=150&varid=147&varid=153&varid=155&varid=154&year=2020&area=&area=-99&render=true&mode=1#tab-1
2. In 2017, almost three million people followed the public service broadcaster's Advent calendar. http://www.skd.se/2017/12/16/svts-julkalender-engagerar-tittarna/

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Notes on contributors

Tünde Puskás is Professor in educational practice at Linköping University, Sweden. She has a background in ethnic studies and has been involved in several research projects focusing on linguistic, cultural and religious diversity in preschools.

Anita Andersson is a Lecturer in society and culture from a school perspective at Linköping University, Sweden. She has a background in religious studies and together with Puskás has been involved in several research projects on religion didactics and existential issues.

ORCID

Tünde Puskás http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3449-2384

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