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## Negotiating Christian Cultural Heritage: Christmas in Schools and Public Service Media

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### Abstract

This article shows how Christmas in schools and public service media for children (PSM) involves negotiation and renewal of Christian cultural heritage. Across the studied cases from Norway and Denmark, we find that the institutions involved seek to realize community. However, community is approached differently in different settings. It is either understood restoratively as a process in which children, including immigrant children, become part of an existing societal community, or constructively as establishing an inclusive community across cultural and religious divides. A major finding is that activities associated with Christianity such as school services are framed in a language of ‘museumification’ and not as part of a living religious practice with the capacity to change and transform. Whereas Islam is positioned as a ‘religious other’, Christianity understood as culture facilitates creative heritage making, establishing community across religious divides. Contrary to political rhetoric, Christian cultural heritage in schools and PSM is by and large not dominated by a safeguarding nationalistic discourse. Rather, traditions and activities related to Christianity are negotiated and appropriated for the benefit of an inclusive community. A premise for making this succeed in schools and PSM is to negotiate Christian cultural heritage as culture, not as religion.

*Keywords: Christian cultural heritage, public schools, public service media, practice theory, culturalization, heritage making, citizenship, mediatization, lived religion, Christmas.*

### Christmas as lived religion practices in schools and the media

In the last couple of years references to the ‘Christian cultural heritage’ have been made frequently in political debates. The term is most often used in a polarizing manner as part of a protective rhetoric, and is linked to discussions of immigration and integration (Beaman 2020). This article’s research trigger was the need to identify how the concept of Christian cultural heritage was understood when analysed as embedded in social practices.<sup>1</sup> In the Nordic context two public institutions have a special obligation in this respect. Public schools and Public Service Media for children (PSM) are independent public agents in increasingly pluralist and multicultural societies, which they should mirror and serve. Yet they are also formally obliged to inform and educate children in their country’s cultural, national, and Christian heritage.<sup>2</sup> How do they do this? This article examines how school principals and PSM leaders operationalize Christian cultural heritage in schools and on screens.

As Daniele Hervieu-Léger theorizes, the dominant agents in traditional chains of cultural memory have been family and religious organizations (Hervieu-Léger 2000). We focus on public institutions, because they are agents negotiating the content of this cultural memory – perhaps even dominant agents for the broader population. The empirical material consists of interviews with two school principals from the Oslo region in Norway, called OsloUrban and OsloSuburban, and two from the Aarhus region in Denmark, called AarhusUrban and AarhusSuburban, as well as an interview with two programme directors in NRK Super (Norsk rikskringkasting) and two in DR, Ultra and Ramasjang (Danmarks Radio). The six interviews were conducted in February 2019 in Norway and in November 2019 in Denmark. Both Denmark and Norway have dominant majority churches adhering to

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1 ReNEW Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World supported this project with two grants in 2019. A workshop grant enabled an interdisciplinary workshop at Aarhus University, where preliminary analyses of the material were discussed. A mobility grant to Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen made it possible to conduct interviews with school principals and PSM leaders in Denmark in February 2019. <<https://www2.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/reimagining-norden-in-an-evolving-world/funding>>

2 Norway: Public Service Media Regulation, see §18 <<https://www.nrk.no/informasjon/nrks-vedtekter-1.5392438>>, Education Act <<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/education-act/id213315/>>. Denmark: Public Service Media agreement 2019–2023, Chapter 2 <[https://kum.dk/fileadmin/\\_kum/2\\_Kulturomraader/Medier/DR/DR\\_s\\_public\\_service-kontrakt\\_for\\_2019-2023\\_med\\_note\\_om\\_film\\_.pdf](https://kum.dk/fileadmin/_kum/2_Kulturomraader/Medier/DR/DR_s_public_service-kontrakt_for_2019-2023_med_note_om_film_.pdf)>, Education Act § 1 and § 5 art. 2c <<https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/1396>>, accessed 7 January 2021.

Evangelical Lutheran Christianity. In Denmark on 1 January 2020 74 per cent of the population were members of the Church of Denmark. In Norway in 2020 68 per cent of the population were members of the Church of Norway.

Christmas is our selected timeframe, simply because we expected it to be the time of the year when Christian cultural heritage issues were most at stake. Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead argue that Christmas is a major example of how the sacred secular is enacted in contemporary Western societies (Riis and Woodhead 2010). Similarly, Christopher Deacy claims that public institutions such as schools and PSM are doing religion in their demarcation of appropriate and inappropriate religion in a secular space (Deacy 2018).

Our empirical research question is: what do school principals and broadcasting leaders aim for in their Christmas efforts? The research interest guiding this question is what Theodor Schatzki terms *the teleoaffective structure* (Schatzki 1996), meaning the ends – the motivation or engine – of what schools and PSM are trying to accomplish in their ‘sayings and doings’ when they enact Christmas. Our interest in the whole Christmas spectrum thus signals an approach in which we abstain from both narrow and broad definitions of religion. Inspired by the lived religion trajectory (McGuire 2008, Ammerman 2007), our emphasis is on Christmas as part of the everyday within the studied institutions. Like Nancy Ammerman (2020), we argue that it is beneficial to study lived religion through the lens of practice theory (Johnsen and Afdal 2020), since this theoretical framing allows natural hybridity to come across as equally true to religiously designated practices and any other practice, and it affords analytical attention to ‘[h]ow patterns of socially constructed action are ... both habitual *and* emergent, constrained and creative’ (Ammerman 2020, 12). Approaching Christian cultural heritage as lived religion from a practice-theoretical perspective implies that we analyse what school principals and PSM leaders do when they create activities for children at Christmas even though they may not – due to culture, history, and law – themselves deploy the term religion.

However, even if practice theory takes practices as their central concern, it is not a unified approach (Schatzki et al. 2001). As Riis and Woodhead maintain, Christmas cannot be understood without taking emotionality into account. We have chosen Schatzki’s definition of practice, because it connects habitual and creative patterns of action with affectivity. More specifically, Schatzki defines *a social practice* as an organized set of sayings and doings joined by: 1) understandings of what these sayings and doings mean; 2) ‘explicit rules, principles, prescriptions, and instructions’; and 3) ‘teleoaffective structures comprising hierarchies of ends, tasks, projects,

beliefs, emotions, moods, and the like' (Schatzki 1996, 98f.). Importantly for our analysis, the teleoaffective structure refers to both the ends within a practice, understood as the normatively regarded oughtness and rightness, and to emotions – how one feels about it – when engaged in these ends (Schatzki 1996, 101). Thus, we have an analytical focus both on the rules that the school principals and PSM leaders articulate as normatively right and wrong actions at Christmas and the affective atonement attached to what they do. Given the sociocultural position of Christmas in the Nordic countries, in Schatzki's terms Christmas can be understood as a 'gigantic nexus of practices and arrangements', or what he labels 'the "plenum of practice"' (Schatzki 2017, 133). Taken together, the analysis of Christmas as an organized set of sayings and doings provides a way to identify and discuss how understandings of Christian cultural heritage play out and are part of schools and PSM. The analysis proceeds stepwise, first by identifying what the school principals and PSM leaders aim for in what they do at Christmas, and second by linking the festival's practices to larger theoretical discourses, asking the following questions: How do school principals and PSM leaders in Norway and Denmark frame 'Christian heritage' in relation to secular values and other religions, and Islam in particular? What kind of citizenship discourses are expressed in their views of 'cultural heritage'? And finally, where is it possible to trace fixed and more open-ended understandings of 'Christian cultural heritage'? Our examination of how Christian cultural heritage is embedded in Christmas as a situated practice within schools and PSM exemplifies that a lived religion approach combined with practice theory enables a linkage between the study of every day social life and larger structures of opportunity and constraint.

### **Scholarly discourses about Christian cultural heritage**

A great risk is attached to employing the term 'Christian cultural heritage'. The concept has a wide range of meanings, and many are, as argued by Lori G. Beaman (2020), highly contentious.<sup>3</sup> We have chosen to make Christian cultural heritage researchable by locating how issues related to it are discussed by researchers addressing it from a Dutch context. There are substantial differences between Dutch religious history and the Nordic

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3 The relationship between religion and the state in the Nordic Countries, and especially the changing religious landscape, has recently been investigated in the NOREL project, which also illuminates important differences between the Nordic countries. See especially (Furseth 2018, Furseth et al. 2019).

context. However, we connect with scholarly debates from the Netherlands because issues of Christian cultural heritage have been even more at stake there. The first scholarly discourse we encounter focuses on how *Christian heritage* has received renewed attention in political analyses. The Dutch scholar Ernst van den Hemel has studied how right-wing politicians in the Netherlands apply references to the Judaeo-Christian West as part of their argument in the media for a secularity that excludes other cultures, and particularly Muslims (Hemel 2018). However, van den Hemel claims that this discursive practice is not exclusive to right-wing politicians, and argues that it is part of a broad reframing of the social imaginary of Western Europe in which it 'is decided who can partake of Western secularity and who is excluded' (van den Hemel 2018, 254). According to van den Hemel, secular and religious-cultural heritage are fused in a way that means 'all sorts of progressive values that, historically, one would not expect to be connected to a religious past, such as feminism and gay rights, are presented as hallmarks of "Judeo-Christian" superiority' (van den Hemel 2018, 253). Our interest is not in studying public media discourse, but examining how school principals and PSM leaders frame 'Christian heritage' and 'Christianity' in relation to secular values and other religions, and Islam and Muslim children in particular.

The second scholarly discourse we link with focuses on *cultural heritage*. Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelin Tonkens have found that culture has become increasingly important in contemporary discussions of citizenship (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016). They argue that citizenship has changed discursively in the Netherlands, and employ the *culturalization of citizenship* to capture 'a process by which culture (emotions, feelings, norms and values, including religion) has come to play a central role in the debate on what it means to be a citizen, either as an alternative or in addition to political, juridical and social citizenship' (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 3). To be a full citizen can imply showing particular feelings, or 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2003), towards cultural activities within a society. To understand the various manifestations of how culturalization takes place in social practices, Duyvendak and Tonkens distinguish between *restorative* and *constructivist views* of culture, as well as *functional* and *affective* ways of mobilizing it in the service of citizenship (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 6–9). In outlining the content of these concepts in the analysis, we ask what kind of citizenship discourses the school principals and PMS leaders express through their views of 'culture', and especially how children from a minority background are approached.

The third discourse to which we relate also has *cultural heritage* as its main occupation. Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte identify two processes ‘at the heart of the interplay between the field of “heritage” and “religion”’ (Meyer and de Witte 2013). The first is the *heritagization of the sacred*, how ‘religious traditions become represented and recognised (or contested and rejected) as heritage’, and they use the phrase ‘the language of “museumification”’ to describe a process in which a living religion becomes a cultural heritage – or a memorial site. The term is used to describe cultural fixation processes; it is not a term that represents museal activities as such (Meyer & de Witte 2013, 276). The second, the *sacralization of heritage* is where ‘certain heritage forms become imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable’ (Meyer & de Witte 2013, 277), and refers to processes of heritage making in which everyday objects acquire a sacralized quality if coded as heritage. Our concern is to study how school principals and PSM leaders negotiate the interplay between heritage and religion. In particular, we address how school principals and PSM leaders approach parts of their Christmas activities as fixed and others as an area of innovation.

## State of the art

### *Religion and school*

Most research on religion in schools in Norway and Denmark addresses issues related to the subject of religious education (RE), and often consists of analyses of political and juridical policy documents. How Christian cultural heritage is spelled out in these documents is a heated topic. Tim Jensen and Karna Kjeldsen argue that the juridical regulation of the school system – and particularly RE – in Denmark presents Christianity as ‘the main provenance of the foundational and core values of democracy, the welfare state etc’, and that the RE syllabus constructs the majority religion as a universal life philosophy and ethics, and not as a religion as such (Jensen & Kjeldsen 2013, 216). Similarly, Bengt Ove Andreassen describes the integrative subject of RE in Norway, introduced in 1998, as based on a cultural heritage perspective (Andreassen 2013, 139). Andreassen perceives ongoing political intentions of promoting Christianity as cultural heritage as a potential threat to the equal treatment of religions. A possible renewal of a Christian cultural heritage perspective, especially in primary and secondary education, is something

he regards as 'a real setback after several years of positive developments' (Andreassen 2013, 160).

Yet as Marie von der Lippe and Sissel Undheim underline, empirically based knowledge about how political controversies and revisions of curricular documents influence teaching activities is very limited, and because activities related to Christmas, for example, are not part of a particular subject, they are the least studied (Von der Lippe & Undheim 2019). Sidsel Vive Jensen has also employed a broader concept of religion in school (Jensen 2019). Some research has been conducted on school services (Øierud 2019, Bråten 2019, Løvland & Repstad 2019). This is a central Christmas activity in schools in both Norway and Denmark, and it is also an activity that has been heavily debated in the media in both countries.<sup>4</sup> Ane Kirstine Brandt and Pia Bøwadt have studied how Danish school principals and pastors describe and reflect on school services as part of school hours. Most argue that it is part of culture and not a problem (Brandt & Bøwadt 2014). Olav Hovdelien and Gunnar Neegaard show that school services in Norway often squeeze school principals between formal curricular guidelines on the one hand and requests from parents on the other (Hovdelien & Neegaard 2014). However, every school in Norway is juridically obliged to offer an educational equivalent to this activity because it involves religious practice,<sup>5</sup> but almost no one has studied what occurs in these alternative activities (Von der Lippe & Undheim 2019), and only a few have studied other Christmas-related activities such as Lucia processions (Undheim 2019).

Minority issues and a concern for diversity have been significant in discussions of religion in schools. Some empirical studies analyse how activities associated with Christianity play out for pupils from a minority, and especially a Muslim, background. Iram Khawaja (Khawaja 2014) and Laura Gilliam (Gilliam 2019) show that Danish schools with a small Muslim minority tend to show little awareness of the Christian content of many school traditions, while more multi-ethnic schools have made efforts to reduce the Christian dimensions of traditions over the years.

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4 The debate on school services was especially intense in Norway in 2016. The media debate resulted in a discussion in parliament in which the prime minister took an active role and defended the tradition <<https://www.nrk.no/norge/solberg-advarer-mot-a-droppe-skolegudstjenester-1.13230140>>, accessed 7 February 2021. In Denmark the debate became heated in 2017 when a school in the northern part of Zealand cancelled the school Christmas service: <<https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/skole-i-graested-i-haard-modvind-har-sloejfet-julegudstjeneste>>, accessed 7 February 2021.

5 <[www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/](http://www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/)>, accessed 20 January 2020.

Departing from practice theory, we especially follow the path laid by researchers such as Lippe and Undheim, Vive Jensen, and Khawaja, in that we focus on how Christmas is practised in school activities that are not necessarily connected with RE. As part of this, we also contribute to existing research on school services.

### *Religion and PSM*

Religion within the media field, and particularly PSM, has also been a topic of discussion in Norway and Denmark (Lundby 2018a), but it has not approached the controversies surrounding religion in schools. The theoretical perspective referred to as *mediatization* has been highly influential in scholarly debates about the media and religion in the Nordic countries (Lundby 2018b). Mediatization, according to Stig Hjarvard, is the long-term process of media-induced changes in culture and society. The concept includes both how media transforms social institutions, and how the media has become an institution in itself, partly replacing other institutions like the church (Hjarvard 2016). A key finding from empirical media research is that religion is newsworthy when it is extremist in one way or another (Hjarvard 2016, 14).

Thus, the many examples of religious extremism, such as the terror attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, are according to Knut Lundby et al. a primary reason why the total coverage of religion in the secular media has increased in recent years. Overall, media interest has shifted from the majority churches to Islam (Lundby 2018b, Lundby 2019, Reintoft Christensen 2019). As part of this situation, references to Christian cultural heritage have been activated both in Norway and Denmark. Recent media studies show that references to Christianity often concern Denmark's national identity (Reintoft Christensen 2019, Nielsen 2011). Similarly, in Norway Christian cultural heritage, according to Cora Alexa Døving and Siv Ellen Kraft, has increasingly been linked to arguments about being Norwegian, used as a contrast to immigrant cultures, and most prominently as part of the populist right-wing discourse (Lundby 2019, 254, Døving & Kraft 2013).

Relevant to our study, Lundby et al. have measured the coverage of Christianity before Easter and Christmas in 1988 and 2008, which was no greater than in other periods in the Nordic countries (Lundby 2018b, 209). However, they only measured direct or explicit references to Christianity. Building on Sofia Sjö's research on religion in Nordic films (Sjö 2012), it is noteworthy that Lundby et al. distance themselves from this concept of religion when analysing popular media. Hence, they argue that religion in the Nordic countries

is often presented without direct references to faith or supernatural beings (Lundby 2018b, 211). Thus, Lundby et al. employ a generally narrow definition of religion, while admitting that this concept is insufficient when studying religion in the Nordic media. Contrary to this narrow definition, we analyse Christmas as a nexus of interlinked practices in which the involved actors negotiate what counts as religion, and what does not.

### **Analysis: Christmas in schools and PSM for children**

Our analytical strategy has been to analyse the material thematically, first, by coding the interviews, inspired by Schatzki's definition of practice, and second, to address how the interview material is connected with the three different scholarly discourses related to Christian cultural heritage. We aim for thick descriptions in our following analysis, moving gradually into more theoretically oriented discussions of the material.

#### *Aims – The teleoaffective structure of Christmas*

What do school principals and PSM leaders aim for in their efforts around Christmas? We begin by addressing what Schatzki identifies as the teleoaffective structure of a practice, including hierarchies of ends, tasks, projects, beliefs, emotions, and moods.

Across schools and the media, as well as national contexts, the main aim of Christmas in these institutions is to live out, express, and enhance the experience of community. This is most directly expressed by the school principal at OsloUrban:

... we want to convey very fundamental values about the importance of taking care of each other across every divide. The most important issue is not what kind of faith you have, what kind of colour you have on your skin or which sexualities you have, or the kind of roles you have in everyday life, but to stand up for others, take care of others, and treat them like yourself ... well, yes, those are the things we speak a lot about (school principal, OsloUrban).

The leaders at DR responded very much like her, but less passionately than the school principal:

It [Christmas] is a lot about community. About understanding each other. Meeting around something you share. It is not a unique position. We don't seek to create something unique (leaders, DR Ramasjang and Ultra).

Their distancing of themselves from occupying a unique position at DR is expressed in comparing their celebration of Christmas to other sites of Christmas. In other words, Christmas is a nexus of practices in which community and mutual understanding is a key aim. However, the school principal also understands community more generally as an ambition: creating a community across every divide is a driver throughout the year. It thus seems that Christmas is an opportunity to intensify the kind of community the schools always seek to accomplish. The school principal at OsloSuburban focuses more on the traditions existing within the overall societal community in which the pupils live:

At the same time, I think that whether or not one believes in something, I think it is sad that people do not know ... if people do not know that there was a person named Jesus, and who did this and that [in the different religions], independent of belief. Also to know differences and similarities with Islam. We emphasize all that with traditions and culture. That's important to me (school principal, OsloSuburban).

Most of OsloSuburban's children come from the majority culture. The school principal's affective expression about being sad concerns making everyone knowledgeable about central issues within this tradition, as well as about other traditions, including Islam.

AarhusSuburban is even more homogeneous than OsloSuburban, and it was difficult in our interview with this school principal for us to detect his motivation in relation to the celebration of Christmas. Christmas seemed a tradition so self-evidently given that it needed no further explanation. The opinions of the principals in the suburban schools resemble what Duyvendak and Tonkens describe as a restorative view of culture. Such a view implies 'the idea of culture as a given – that its content is fixed and mostly also known' (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 6)

However, it is not only in the two suburban schools where a *restorative view* is key to understanding their concept of community. The school principal at the very diverse AarhusUrban eagerly expresses a similar understanding. However, her departure point is different. Like the other interviewees, she distances herself from Christmas as religious, pointing to community and mutual understanding:

You could say it's not this 'preachy Christmas' we engage in – we care about the joy and community around Christmas, the tradition and so on

... it's always about getting to know each other's worlds (school principal, AarhusUrban).

She connects this aim closely with restoring the cultural knowledge of a group of children with little prior knowledge of this tradition:

Well, it's this concept of cultural formation that we want to include in the school. And I'm very much engaged in the whole question and task of integration, and it's crucial to me that those parents who have chosen to live in Denmark with their children know about the society they live in, and about what is important for the majority in this society. It doesn't mean that they should love it ... but they should know about it, because I believe knowledge creates better understanding and insight, right? (school principal, AarhusUrban).

This school principal uses affective language to describe this restorative task. However, the term 'restorative' may be misleading here. The minority children to whom the school principal refers have other religious and cultural backgrounds than the majority. Thus, her approach is restorative in that she facilitates minority pupils in discovering the traditions of the majority culture in their country of residence. Enhancing this transfer of cultural knowledge seems a key engine in how she facilitates Christmas in this school.

However, in two of the Norwegian cases we find a rather different elaboration of Christmas as community.

As evident in the first statement of the school principal at OsloUrban, community is not predominantly restorative knowledge of Christmas as part of the majority culture; it is instead elaborated as community across religion, skin colour, and sexuality. When asked directly what she thinks about the relationship between Christianity and Norwegian culture with respect to Christmas, she responds:

I think, yes please, both. We can't put away the Christian bit of Christmas; it is after all an important cultural heritage we carry with us. But at the same time I think we have a longer history, a broader perspective than just looking at what is really a very marginal celebration – so yes, both in a historical perspective, but also in a global perspective (school principal, OsloUrban).

To achieve her goal of an inclusive community at Christmas, she seeks to open up the interpretation of Christmas historically and to move beyond

the Christian celebration globally as well. Such a view approaches what Duyvendak and Tonkens describe as a constructivist view of culture, 'where culture is seen as a process in the making' (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 6).

A similar constructivist approach was also evident at NRK Super.

We don't in any way wish to be excluding. We don't wish that children of a different religion should opt out of us because we communicate things that their parents don't wish for us to communicate to their child' (Leaders, NRK Super)

This aim was communicated to us with affective engagement. The interviewees underlined that NRK Super had a clear vision of not offending anyone from another religious background. To do this, they tried to avoid direct references to the Christian origin of Christmas and sought to be inclusive by transforming what they referred to as the Christmas gospel into new stories conveying the same values.

...we talk about the same values that lie at the heart of the story, the Christmas gospel ... The value in that story, we try to tell that through other stories (leaders, NRK Super).

However, the leaders said that NRK Super presented the Islamic festival of Eid during Christmas to make this religious tradition more comprehensible for most children in Norway.

We got complaints when we broadcast a programme about Eid and Islam on the second day of Christmas. My assessment is the opposite... Such a programme at Christmas puts it [Eid] into a context that children can relate to more profoundly. Well, this was a digression, but our concern is to mirror every worldview (leaders, NRK Super).

The analysis thus far indicates that school principals and PSM leaders understand community as the ultimate *telos* of their Christmas efforts. However, their concepts of community differ, and are categorized here as restorative and constructivist views of culture. Most of our cases seek to make children part of traditions existing in society at large, but OsloUrban and NRK Super explicitly seek to construct communities across religious and cultural divides. In particular, NRK Super attempts to convey that every religion and worldview is respected and treated alike. Yet Christianity and Islam

are positioned differently. As Nadia Jeldtoft argues, creating new stories such as Christmas serials directly inspired by the values of 'the Christmas gospel' casts Christianity as an 'authorized religion' as part of a 'secular normality'. In contrast, portraying the Eid festival as a distinctly religious festival during Christmas implies a position in which Islam inhabits a deviant role as the 'religious other' (cf. Jeldtoft 2013, 26).

### **Rules – the principles and instructions of Christmas**

Following Schatzki's definition of practices as an organized set of doings and sayings, our next analytical step focuses on how explicit rules, principles, prescriptions, and instructions influence how school principals and PSM leaders realize Christmas. Objective clauses, curricula, and directives from educational offices are examples of such explicit rules framing what schools are doing and saying. Similarly, PSM is also linked with political signals, vision and strategy documents, and state directives. However linked, explicit rules do not determine a practice, both because the different instructions must be put into practice and because rules themselves are an evolving area (Schatzki 1996, 104).

Despite minor differences, Christmas in schools and PSM contain many similar elements. The principals and leaders told us about Christmas trees, Christmas ornaments, arts and craft activities, small competitions, lighting candles, Christmas songs, Christmas food, countdown activities, gatherings, and a great deal about Santa Claus. Everyone emphasized that Christmas was a tradition, and that tradition was about doing the same thing each year. However, they also told us about newly invented activities.

One such newly invented activity takes place at the two Oslo schools; their innovation is directly connected with an explicit rule issued by the Norwegian school authorities. The heated debate on school services in 2016 mentioned above ended with new guidelines for all schools in Norway. These legally binding guidelines encourage every school to take part in school services before Christmas in their local Lutheran church. However, the guidelines make it mandatory to arrange an alternative activity for pupils not attending, and this activity ought to be an equivalent of the school service.<sup>6</sup> Both school principals at the Oslo area schools told us how they had realised this obligation to arrange an alternative to the service. They

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<sup>6</sup> <[www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/](http://www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/)>, accessed 21 January 2020.

emphasized that many elements such as most of the Christmas songs and the fact that the pupils were active in performances of songs and drama were identical to the school service. The main differences were that the nativity play in church was replaced by stories from the pre-Christian era, and that Santa played a large role. A major concern to both school principals was that the alternative event at school should be as solemn as the service in church.

It ought to be something that transcends. It might be a light festivity or something about traditions or a folk fairy tale. At least, it's not supposed to be like a regular school day ... The alternative arrangement is supposed to have the same function, to gather, to light candles, to do something together, to get that community feeling the other pupils get at the school service (school principal, OsloSuburban).

In Denmark there is no such explicit rule about alternatives. Parents can exempt their children, but most children participate in the school service. The few exempted children stay in the school library or watch a film while the rest are away. The school principal at AarhusSuburban regards school services as a regular part of school:

That service is part of tradition. And if anybody asks, it is part of school. It is just like Christianity classes [a mandatory subject until 7<sup>th</sup> grade]. Nobody is exempted from Christianity classes either. Well of course, we have migrant children and children from Muslim backgrounds, but they participate just like everybody else (school principal, AarhusSuburban).

An equivalent view is not found at AarhusUrban, where most pupils have minority backgrounds. The principal at this school reports that school services are not part of what they do. Instead, the school principal initiated a new arrangement some years ago. In the afternoon of the last Friday in November the school invites all neighbours and parents, many of them unaccustomed to Christmas celebrations, to gather around an enormous Christmas tree in the school's front yard. At this gathering the tree is lit for the first time. They sing no hymns, but traditional Christmas songs that 'suit a very tall tree', as the school principal puts it; the older pupils sell traditional Christmas goodies, and the school principal gives a short speech.

A similar gathering has been invented at OsloUrban for the last day of school before Christmas, reflecting school guidelines in Norway stating that Christmas gatherings on the last day before the holiday should assemble

all the pupils.<sup>7</sup> The school principal at OsloUrban describes all pupils and teachers gathering in the dark at the school and parading out into a nearby forest with lit torches in their hands. They sing traditional Christmas songs, leading the parade to a big bonfire. The ultimate highlight for the children is when the school principal shouts ‘Santa is here’, and everybody runs to find sweets hidden in the bushes, before they walk back to school, where parents volunteer to serve Christmas porridge.

These newly invented Christmas activities at the OsloUrban and AarhusUrban are closely linked to their aims of establishing community beyond divides. Community has also been decisive in how NRK Super and DR Ramasjang and Ultra have invented Christmas TV serials in recent years.

When we understood where it was going [towards streaming], one of the things that we really worked hard for was to figure out the kind of content that could gather the whole family. What is it that makes them turn on the big screen, saying; ‘Come on, let’s watch it together?’ (leaders, NRK Super).

Their solution was to create a new Christmas serial with what they called ‘our own Charles Dickens universe’ about ‘the real Santa Claus, the one you just have to believe in’. This serial, and the ones that followed, combining spectacular imaginary worlds with the everyday lives of children, did what the producers hoped for. They gathered the family in larger numbers than the NRK leaders thought possible, and it was almost ‘like returning to a time we didn’t know existed any longer’. The newly invented Christmas calendars at DR have also been very successful.

Hence, despite the first impression that Christmas is primarily a tradition, we find several examples of innovative processes in which schools and PSM have intentionally created new activities. We find that the explicit obligation to have an alternative to school services in Norway has had a stimulating *heritage formation* effect on both schools, regardless of whether they have few or many pupils from minority backgrounds. Similar heritage formation processes have also taken place in Denmark, where there has not been a similar legislative process – but only at AarhusUrban, where most pupils are from minority backgrounds.

Meyer and de Witte describe heritage formation as a process in which heritage forms become imbued with sacrality, and everyday objects acquire a sacralized quality when coded as heritage (Meyer & de Witte 2013,

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7 <[www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/](http://www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/skole-og-opplaring/saksbehandling/skolegudstjenester/)>

279). Our analysis shows that the Christmas serials, alternatives to school services, gathering around the Christmas tree, and outings in the forest all create solemn community experiences for the family, at school, and in the local area. The principals consciously employ and adapt heritage elements already imbued with a sacralized quality, and this enables the coding of the new activities as heritage. As Undheim finds in her research on St Lucia processions (Undheim 2019), elements with diffuse religious connotations – such as the Christmas tree, the lighting of candles, and modern Santa narratives and stories from the pre-Christian era – are preferred in these heritage formation processes. Hence, the explicit rules and principles for how Christmas is observed in schools and PSM are not only a matter of tradition but an evolving field creating new ritual spaces in these public institutions.

Yet we also find that explicit regulation of an activity, and the tendency to understand something as a tradition, can facilitate *heritage preservation* processes – what Meyer and de Witte refer to as the heritagization of the sacred (Meyer & de Witte 2013, 278). The school principal in AarhusSuburban is confident that the local church shares his understanding of the school service as a tradition and part of school. Both school principals from Norway emphasize that their school services do not violate the official guidelines and describe in detail how the services are the same every year. This year, one teacher reported that the pastor had included a new and too ‘evangelizing’ song in the school service, whereupon the school principal had immediately called the pastor and urged her not to use that song next year. According to the school principal such incidents put a tradition like the school service at risk.

If I get too many complaints, if too many new things are introduced [by the church], it [school services] will come to an end. I have too many fights as principal, and I have to choose them (school principal, OsloSuburban).

In sum, the incident with the new song introduced to the school service in OsloSuburban illustrates how school services are ruled by what Duyvendak and Tonkens refer to as a *historical canon* (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 8). A focus on retaining school services as something given resonates with Meyer and de Witte’s heritagization of the sacred, whereby religious traditions become represented in a framework of heritage (Meyer & de Witte 2013, 277). As such, the school principals talk about school services in a ‘language of “museumification”’ (Meyer & de Witte 2013, 278). School services are not envisioned as a transforming field or seen as part of a living religion that

changes and evolves (Johnsen 2020, Nielsen & Johansen 2019). The visit to the local church is instead coded as a visit to a memorial space where pupils learn about a specific cultural heritage. However, the alternatives to the school service and the new Christmas calendars are examples of heritage making. The intention in both schools and PSM is to provide children with experiences of Christmas as something that transcends the everyday. To achieve this, elements associated with Christianity become appropriated in ways that make the new heritage forms appear powerful and authentic.

### **Understandings – the meaning of Christmas**

The analysis so far provides insights into what school principals and PSM leaders are seeking, and what they do to achieve these aims, but, following Schatzki, a practice is also constituted by understandings of meaning. This final section of the analysis focuses on what the different aims and actions mean to the interviewed principals and leaders, and how the meanings they attach to Christmas are related to different citizenship discourses.

The leaders at DR Ramasjang emphasize that it is their obligation to offer a safe Christmas space:

Christmas is absolutely traditional with Santas and Christmas. The world of Ramasjang is not that complex. We have a Christmas calendar that is absolutely safe and free of risk. ... Our promise at Ramasjang is that it is safe, and that you will not be scared and frightened (leaders, DR Ramasjang and Ultra).

The active pursuit of a minority perspective is not an option. For example, having programmes about Islamic festivities during Christmas, as NRK does, is unthinkable to the leaders from DR. 'We always get reactions when we do something on Islam. We have never focused on Islam during Christmas, and I cannot imagine that we will ever do that.' Accordingly, this assessment by the DR leader can be traced to the 'hypervisibility' of Islam and Muslims in public and political debates. Dominant understandings of a 'secular normality' as culturally linked to Christianity make programmes about Islam during Christmas seem impossible for the directors in DR (cf. Jeldtoft 2013).

The citizenship discourse at the other three schools and NRK Super can be coded as having *functional* and *affective* views of the meaning of Christmas. Duyvendak and Tonkens describe a functional view of culture as including

skills such as speaking the language of a country, gaining knowledge about a country's history and traditions, and getting to know conventions in politics and education (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 7). We find this meaning of Christmas clearly expressed in AarhusUrban, here exemplified by how they decorate the school at Christmas:

We decorate when it's Christmas, we do that, and I usually say that we generally overdo things here, going all in, without any modifications... I'm thinking, there's a lot of schools making less out of Christmas than we do, but there are a lot of children here who never celebrate Christmas at home ... Several families tell me that they appreciate that their children get to know what Christmas is here (school principal, AarhusUrban).

The school principal underlines that the decorations are not religiously motivated, but a way to help children, often from other religions, understand 'why Danes go crazy almost from October and onwards'.

The school principal at OsloSuburban has a similar functional approach, even if the demography is much less dominated by minority pupils. The principal wants as many pupils as possible to attend the school service:

It seems to me that most people support it [the school service] because you often go to church for a wedding or a funeral, and then it's good to know just a little ... to take off your cap, to sit for an hour, that is also important. It's something not everybody learns nowadays (school principal, OsloSuburban).

The school principal also expresses a functional attitude towards a minority that defines the celebration of Christmas as sinful. Instead of reducing or changing the school's Christmas programme, she renames activities: for example, the Christmas lunch becomes 'winter lunch'.

The emphasis is therefore to provide a kind of functional cultural literacy, and this view is aligned with the restorative approach to culture as something given, as mentioned above. Christmas activities are there to equip children – and particularly minority children and their families – with implicit codes of culture and conduct needed in society. The focus is to make children knowledgeable about Christmas conventions, not to negotiate Christmas afresh. The citizen discourse at these two schools, one urban and one suburban, is therefore functional, and particular feelings about Christmas are not expected from immigrant children or parents.

As opposed to a functional view, Duyvendak and Tonkens explain that 'an affective view on culture privileges emotional meanings attributed to culture' (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 7). Thus, if one is to be recognized as a citizen, certain feelings are prescribed.

As has been shown, the OsloUrban school and NRK operate with a constructivist view of culture. They aim for a renegotiation of Christmas that includes cultural and religious differences. We find that their constructivist approach to Christmas is combined with a more affective view of cultural citizenship. The engine driving their Christmas programme is to create and envision a community across all divides. Being inclusive is at the top of their hierarchy of aims, and this affects how they understand the meaning of what they do. The aim is communicated to us through the affective intensity with which the school principal and PSM speak about it, and is also visible in their disappointment when they feel they have failed in this.

The NRK leaders emphasize strongly that 'We are afraid of being exclusivist', and that 'there is a lot that bears that mark'. It is important to them that their Christmas activities contribute to a special Christmas feeling for all the children living in Norway.

Creating the Christmas feeling is at least something I find important when children watch TV at Christmas. That they get an experience of it as something special, that they get this ... this slightly intangible Christmas feeling (leaders, NRK Super).

The extent to which they believe they can create this feeling becomes decisive in their self-evaluation. Christmas on NRK Super this year was a disappointment to one of the leaders:

It wasn't good this year, and I'm not thinking that it did not contain the Christian Christmas gospel, but there was a lack of Christmas colours, Christmas decoration, Christmas traditions. It was all coloured too little by things children associate with Christmas (leaders, NRK Super).

Thus, the meaning the NRK leaders attach to Christmas is associated with feelings. They do not focus on functional skills related to Christmas conventions but on the creation of a special Christmas feeling. However, this feeling is intangible and unrelated to the pursuit of the kind of feelings to which Duyvendak and Tonkens refer, such as feelings for the nation or being Norwegian. We find that the feeling rule they prescribe is connected to their

overall *telos* of creating a community in which every child, and particularly immigrant children, can feel at home.

Similarly, as has been mentioned, the school principal at OsloUrban was enthusiastic about their Christmas programme, and particularly the fact that they could do it in a school with many nationalities:

We have pupils from more than 20 nationalities, and we've had more ... bringing their cultural heritage with them, and it's of great value to all of us to get to know one another's cultural heritage (school principal, OsloUrban).

Here, however, neither certain feelings for Norway as a nation nor feelings attached to being Norwegian are being prescribed. Rather, it is expected that all pupils and their parents will take part in, and probably also feel at home within, the school community. This expectation becomes particularly clear when the school principal reports with sadness that a couple of children have been exempted from attending every activity related to Christmas. Not being able to include everybody is more emotionally disappointing to her than to those principals and leaders with a more functional approach to citizenship. Exempting one's children from Christmas activities does not imply withdrawing them from a cultural canon. It is a symbolic action that goes against all this school aims for in being a community across every divide. Not attending is therefore an action that violates a constitutive feeling rule that is expected at this school.

Taken together, Duyvendak's and Tonkens' hypothesis is that constructive notions of culture facilitate access to full citizenship better than restorative notions (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 8–9). They argue that a constructivist view leaves more room for 'immigrants and natives who do not adapt to dominant groups and their norms' (Duyvendak & Tonkens 2016, 8). However, our finding is that a constructivist view, combined with an affective view of citizenship, facilitates feeling rules that expect everybody to participate to demonstrate their belonging to the community. The analysis shows that a restorative view of culture makes cultural conventions available, but such a view is not necessarily suppressive, as Duyvendak and Tonkens claim. When it is combined with functional notions, a restorative view of culture can contribute knowledge about Christmas without attaching specific feelings to it.

### **Findings and conclusion**

This research project was triggered by the observation that Christian cultural heritage is often used rhetorically in political debates, and often in a safeguarding way, particularly with an edge towards immigration and integration. We asked ourselves how this fuzzy concept was dealt with by institutions that must operationalize it as practice in tangible everyday life. Our choice was to employ Schatzki's practice theory, framed by the lived religion approach, in a study of public schools and PSM in Norway and Denmark, with Christmas as the selected timeframe. Our hunch about Christmas as particularly interesting when studying how public spaces demarcate appropriate and inappropriate religion (Deacy 2018) is confirmed. However, our analysis both confirms and nuances van den Hemel's finding that Christian heritage is framed as a form of secularity that excludes other cultures, and Islam in particular, in public and political debates (van den Hemel 2018). Our main finding is that school principals and PSM leaders frame 'Christian heritage' and 'Christianity' in ways that place activities associated with Christianity at a demarcated periphery, as is the case with school services. Yet we also find that elements from Christianity become fused with secular values and other religions in ways that make it intangible, as is the case with the Christmas serials. Our material therefore indicates that Islam becomes visible as a 'religious other', while the coding of Christianity as culture – particularly at Christmas – facilitates a 'secular normality' in which central religiously coded elements such as the nativity story are made invisible.

In relation to the findings of previous research on school and religion that Christianity is still given a dominant position at the expense of secularly formulated values (Jensen & Kjeldsen 2013) (Andreassen 2013), our analysis shows that policy discussions about curricula and guidelines have a significant impact on how school principals understand and perform Christmas activities. With one exception precarity is reflected in how the school principals treat Christmas activities with strong associations with Christianity. To a large extent, even if not said directly, human rights and secular values have a more regulative impact on what the school principals deem appropriate and inappropriate activities at their schools than references to Christianity as the majority culture.

One of the Christmas activities that has received most public and media interest, as well as considerable research attention, is school services. The distinction shown in our study is that approaching school services as a tradition creates a heritage preservation effect. Changes to the annual school service, initiated by the local churches, threaten this tradition. Thus, local

churches seem to pay a price for being included as a tradition in school life. As Beaman claims concerning law and public discourse, a move from the realm of religion to culture denies religious communities an active social or cultural role in modern society, but the movement assumes new life for practices and symbols formerly characterized as religious (Beaman 2020, 131; cf. Hervieu-Léger 2000, 86). However, we find the same dynamic in schools and public service media. Churches are included more as 'heritage' than as 'lived' religion. We argue that public debate and the school authorities' regulations, especially in Norway, situate school services as a museum or memorial site, not as part of a living religious practice with the capacity to change and transform (Nielsen & Johansen 2019, Johnsen 2020). Our study shows that elements known from school services often play a significant role when school principals and PSM leaders develop new Christmas activities to create a community across religious divides.

As von der Lippe and Undheim argue, newly formed activities are an under-investigated but growing research field (Von der Lippe & Undheim 2019). This study's contribution is to show how formal and legal instructions concerning alternatives to school services in Norway have stimulated heritage formation processes within the schools studied. We also show that no similar process has taken place in Denmark, where such regulations do not exist. However, a similar heritage formation process has taken place in the Danish school where they do not arrange school services with a large number of migrant pupils. By and large, our study confirms Khawaja's (Khawaja 2014) and Gilliam's (Gilliam 2019) studies showing that schools with many pupils from minority backgrounds downplay traditions with explicitly Christian origins, but we also find that most school principals are sensitive to their schools' cultural and religious diversity.

We argue that functional notions of culture can especially enable significant cultural literacy in pupils of different origins. Those school principals who combine a restorative and functional view of culture do not demand special religious or national feelings from those attending Christmas activities. However, we find that a constructivist view of culture combined with an affective approach to citizenship understands attendance more emotionally and expects everyone to feel at home within the secularly defined school community.

As has been mentioned, the mediatization discourse has influenced religion and media research, particularly in the Nordic countries. DR leaders especially expressed a low level of positive affectivity in relation to Christmas. An explanation of their modest engagement might be that Christmas

goes against the logic whereby religion is primarily newsworthy when its actors are out of sync and extremist in one way or another (Hjarvard 2016). This is probably even more evident in our material, because we have interviewed leaders responsible for PSM aimed at children. Christmas puts PSM back in time – to a time that was thought scarcely to still exist. For example, Christmas serials cannot be taken away without an outcry. This can be interpreted as an example of mediatization, because it signals that PSM channels for children have become institutions in themselves, and even more so when attendance at institutions like the church is in decline.

The central finding, that media coverage as a whole has shifted from the majority churches to Islam, does not hold on the DR and NRK children's channels during Christmas. The broadcast of any programme directly focusing on Islam is not an option at DR, while this has been done by NRK. As has been shown, there is a difference between the two PSM institutions' aims, particularly at Christmas. Being a channel for all children, and not excluding children and families from a minority background, is a driver at NRK, while the leaders at DR seem to have accepted that Christmas serves the majority population. However, Christian preaching of the Christmas gospel was absolutely not an option at NRK, and DR did not address it as an issue at all. Yet our study supports Sjö in arguing that religion needs to be studied more broadly. Christmas was everywhere at DR and NRK, even if direct and explicit references to Christianity were minimal.

This study has analysed Christmas in schools and PSM to move beyond Christian cultural heritage at a rhetorical level in public media debates. The tendency to use this concept in a polarizing way and as part of a protective rhetoric about immigration and integration runs contrary to our findings. Overall, schools and PSM operationalize Christian cultural heritage during Christmas by maintaining a critical awareness of activities identified as Christian, activating both a restorative and constructivist view of culture, and engaging in a heritage formation process that provides cultural literacy and creates sacralized spaces in secular institutions. In conclusion, what school principals and public service media leaders aim for in their Christmas efforts is an inclusive community. A premise for making this succeed is the negotiation of Christian cultural heritage as culture, not as religion.

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