



## Banal and Nostalgic: Memories of Swedishness in the Christmas Calendar

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### Abstract

This article explores how Christian heritage is engaged with, strengthened, and contested in and through Swedish newspapers and in the annual Swedish Christmas calendar. Although Sweden is perceived as highly secular and characterized by an increased distance between the former state church and the Swedish population, ideas about Swedish cultural heritage are still tied to notions of a Christian past. Previous research has highlighted Christmas as particularly salient for Swedes' understanding of their cultural heritage and national identity, which includes perceptions of Christmas as 'merely' a tradition. Using theories of nostalgia and banal religion, this article addresses how Swedishness is constructed in the Christmas calendar, as well as through its framing in Swedish newspapers. While the narrative of the Calendar does not normally include overt references to Christian parables, it frequently uses Christian and folkloric symbolism to effect a backdrop of nostalgia. I argue that the Calendar and its framing in newspapers play on conceptions of Swedishness that are inextricably linked to ideas of 'secularized' Christianity, and by extension to constructions of what counts as national belonging in contemporary Sweden.

*Keywords: national identity, banal religion, Christmas, Christmas calendar, Advent calendar, secularism*

### Secular Sweden and mediatized Christian heritage

Despite large-scale surveys asserting Sweden's secularity (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2011), and while a majority of the population is characterized by weak personal connections to the Swedish church, Swedes do appear to maintain a sense of kinship with Christian traditions as part of a cultural or national identity (Lövheim et al. 2018). However, in contemporary Sweden

children are more likely to encounter religion and religious people in and through media than to experience religious practices themselves (Lövheim 2012); many children growing up in Sweden may thus only witness Christian practices and rituals via popular culture that plays on tradition and nostalgia like the Christmas calendar. The cultural heritage passed on to children by schools and public service media is still imbricated in Christian traditions (Burén 2015; Thurfjell 2015); traditions with which educators – in schools, as well as in public service media – are increasingly unfamiliar. This affects the depiction of traditions, in many cases by discursively reducing elements of practice rooted in Christianity to ‘mere tradition’ (Reimers 2019). In this article I explore how ideas of Christian heritage are engaged with, strengthened, and contested in and through the Swedish news and popular media.

Karin Kittelman-Flensner has shown strong linkages between culture, Christianity, and the celebration of traditional holidays – particularly Christmas – and perceptions of Swedishness among pupils and teachers in Sweden; a link that ‘was articulated as obvious and unproblematic’ (Kittelman-Flensner 2015, 206). Some of her informants would thus affirm the Christian roots of Christmas while disavowing religious linkages, emphasizing practices over belief (Kittelman-Flensner 2015). In this article I examine a constantly debated cultural institution in Sweden, the televised Christmas calendar, exploring how Swedishness is constructed both in the Calendar itself and through its framing in Swedish newspapers. Despite the Calendar’s ubiquity, there is a clear lack of understanding of its place within Swedish culture. I thus explore how ‘banal’ Christian elements (building on work by Hjarvard 2012) may evoke a sense of nostalgia, and how this nostalgia plays into conceptions of Swedish national identity and modes of belonging.

### The Christmas Calendar

Paper Advent calendars with Christmas motifs appeared in Germany in the early 1900s and first came to Sweden in 1934. Unlike the Christian motifs in the German variants, Swedish calendars tended to depict the countryside, nature, snowmen, sledges, and *tomtenissar*.<sup>1</sup> The first mass mediatized calendar was aired in 1956 on Swedish Radio, and a paper calendar specifically designed to accompany the radio programme came a few years later. In the

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<sup>1</sup> *Tomtenisse* or *tomte*, generally translated as gnome. The contemporary understanding depends largely on national romantic depictions (famously Victor Rydberg’s poem ‘Tomten’, originally published in *Ny Illustrerad Tidning* in 1881) and are influenced by German folklore (Strömberg 2017).

1960s the televised Calendar started airing, first called the Advent calendar, switching to the Christmas calendar in 1971 (Nordiska Museet 2013). The contemporary televised Calendar is an originally produced show each year, running from 1 December and ending on Christmas Eve, with episodes of around fifteen minutes. While the Calendar's narrative does not necessarily have anything to do with Christmas, traditional celebrations, folkloric elements, and cultural references often function as a backdrop. There has been some research in Denmark on the Danish televised Christmas calendar, in which the cosy and nostalgic features of the holiday season are often emphasized, and traditional celebrations and folkloric elements often function as a backdrop (Agger 2013; 2020). Gunhild Agger has argued that the Danish variant has 'assumed the status of an institution' (Agger 2013, 267). There is no known equivalent research on the Swedish Calendar, but in a more general sense previous research has noted the role mass media – particularly newspapers – plays in nationalizing and homogenizing 'traditional' celebrations in Sweden (Löfgren 1993). For example, Strömberg (2017) has noted the role *Stockholms Dagblad* (1824–1931) played in shaping the modern celebration of Lucia, which had not previously been celebrated nationally (Strömberg 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Considering research which questions if the national romantic movement in Sweden truly ended (Barton 2002), it is crucial to examine how contemporary newspapers in Sweden frame traditions, as such framings are part of nationalizing processes. Johansen and Johansson has pointed out that public service media function 'as agents negotiating the content of cultural memory' (Johnsen and Johansen 2021, 232), and as an institution involved in the 'negotiation and renewal of Christian cultural heritage' seeking 'to realize community' (Johnsen and Johansen 2021, 231 referring to Denmark and Norway). The work of Strömberg (2017) and Löfgren (1993) suggests that newspapers in Sweden have a similar function in negotiating cultural memory. The prominent place given to the calendar in Swedish newspapers during the Christmas season indicates that the Calendar itself is part of this negotiation. In this article I analyse the Calendar which celebrated the sixtieth anniversary – *Mirakel* (Eng. *Miracle*) – as well as examining how it, and the Calendar more broadly, was positioned in Swedish newspapers in 2020.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucia refers to St Lucy's Day on 13 December. The modern celebration initiated by *Stockholms Dagblad* was tied to the national romantic movement in Sweden, and as Strömberg (2017) shows, contained allusions to racial biological ideology.

### *Data and method*

*Mirakel* was interesting for several reasons, first because it depicts and contrasts two Christmases – in 1920 and in 2020 – as well as being the Calendar which celebrated the sixtieth anniversary. The analysis focuses on the depiction of Christmas via Christian, commercial, and folkloric elements, as noted during the qualitative coding, and how these tie into ideas of Swedishness. In addition, 36 articles related to *Mirakel* in Swedish newspapers were analysed, excluding notices about airtimes. Articles were found using the search terms *julkalender* (Eng. *Christmas calendar*) AND *mirakel* in media retriever, which yielded 415 results between 2019-11-01 and 2020-07-31 (day of data collection, most were from the end of November and the beginning of December 2020). Articles were selected from all the available print media; articles printed in multiple local newspapers were only analysed once. An additional search was conducted to analyse coverage of the sixtieth anniversary, which left an additional 21 articles (excluding articles focusing on *Mirakel*). Articles were found using the search terms *julkalender* AND 60 between 2020-01-01 and 2020-12-31, which yielded 137 results.<sup>3</sup> The newspaper articles were coded inductively, focusing on mentions of folkloric or Christian elements, how the Calendar was described in general, the use of emotive words or descriptions in the article (the most prevalent examples being a calendar living up to expectations, *julkänsla* [Eng. *Christmas atmosphere*], cosiness, the calendar fulfilling a need, and nostalgia), and mentions of old calendars. In the articles that covered *Mirakel* the elements in the *Mirakel* narrative were coded. In the articles covering the anniversary whether and how the articles described the historical development of the calendar was coded.

### **Chains of memory and nostalgia**

In this article I am working from a theoretical understanding of nostalgia that builds on Danièle Hervieu-Léger's (2000) seminal work on religion as a chain of memory. She defines religion as 'an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which the consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 82). In discussing the splintering of collective memory due to the processes of modernization, Hervieu-Léger defines

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<sup>3</sup> A search for the fiftieth anniversary was also conducted, which yielded 10 relevant articles. Overall, these articles did not appear to add or detract from the findings of the sixtieth anniversary and were excluded.

secularization as a crisis of collective memory, as the continuance of the chain depends on consciously passing on mentions and memories of the past. This splintering means that institutions like the Church of Sweden and its attendant practices and traditions 'become sources of cultural heritage revered for their historical significance and their emblematic function', but that they in themselves are unlikely to be 'mobilized for the production of collective meaning' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 90). Religion is thus 'transformed into a reservoir of signs and values which no longer correspond to clear-cut forms of belonging and behavior that comply with rules made by religious institutions', signs that can be 'incorporated into other symbolic constructions, especially ones which come into play in the development of ethnic identity' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 158).

This is aligned with Hjarvard's (2012) notion of banal religion, building on Michael Billig's (1995) work on banal nationalism, and in turn drawing on Hanna Arendt's (1963) conceptualization of the banality of evil. Billig uses the concept of the banal to highlight the 'ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced' (Billig 1995, 6), emphasizing with Arendt (1963) that banal refers to the commonplace and does not indicate harmlessness. Hjarvard deploys the concept to refer to religion as a commodity dispersed in public discourse, outside politics and inside culture; not in content explicitly dealing with religion as such, but as marginal phenomena appearing 'in relation to issues and stories that have no explicit, elaborate or intentional religious meaning', evoked to connote authenticity, for example (Hjarvard 2012, 34). This transformation does not sever the links with Christianity but does obscure them, and Christian elements are primarily mobilized 'for the purposes of identity' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 159).

Because of the high level of church membership coupled with low levels of belief, Hervieu-Léger identifies Sweden as an example of 'ethicosymbolic imbrication of ethnics and religion in modernity' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 160). In describing the rise of 'ethnic religions', Hervieu-Léger emphasizes that this is the result of a process of reconstruction of religious memory, arguing that 'the religious and the ethnic strain compete or combine in re-establishing a sense of "we" and of "our" which modernity has at once fractured and created a nostalgia for' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 157). She further emphasizes that religion is 'effectively consigned to a function of nostalgic or exotic remembrance, apart from fulfilling the function of memory and upholding the survival of tradition in the world of modernity' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 86). Nostalgia can thus be seen to function as a defence against change and as providing a sense of continuity with the past (May 2017). The emphasis on nostalgia in contemporary popular culture thus addresses a 'loss of

identity, continuity or stability' (Niemeyer and Wentz 2014, 131); an attempt to patch the broken chain. Boym thus argues that we are experiencing 'a global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (Boym 2007). In this article I build on Schiermer and Carlson's extension of Boym's (2007) categorization of nostalgia as restorative, reflective, or ironic to analyse how Swedishness is constructed, both in the Calendar itself and through its framing in newspapers, examining how 'banal' Christian elements may evoke a sense of nostalgia, and how this nostalgia plays into conceptions of Swedish national identity and modes of belonging.

### Framings of the Calendar as part of Sweden's memory

The press coverage of *Mirakel* focuses on the contrasting ways in which Christmas is depicted. One article likens the 1920 depiction to a Christmas card (Nilsson 2020); another describes *Mirakel* as 'packaged in a shimmering Christmas wrapper' (Lindström 2020); a third considers it 'an adventure which mixes *folkbildning* (Eng. *popular education*)<sup>4</sup> with Christmas cosiness and a vintage feel' (Lindblad 2020). A few emphasize the similarity between the depiction of 1920 and the Swedish children's classic *Maddicken*; *Mirakel* is thus framed both as referring to other nostalgic objects and as depicting a particularly nostalgic aesthetic. Moreover, several newspapers frame it as especially crucial, as 'it has been a year that has left people longing for more carefree times' (Lindblad 2020). The Calendar is more broadly framed as something that 'lends a sense of security' even for adults, especially in times of social distancing (Nilsson 2020). In one article Johanna Gårdare – the chief of children's programming at SVT – is quoted as saying:

There is probably a greater need for a common context and for escapism into fictional worlds this year. It's our pleasure to be able to fulfil this need with warm and inclusive content (TT 2020).

There is a tendency for newspapers to frame the Calendar as inclusive and comforting, and *Mirakel* is positioned as functioning as a cure for longing. However, it is not necessarily a past version of Sweden that is longed for but the idea of a pure childhood experience of Christmas, facilitated by idyllic depictions of past Swedish Christmases – a Christmas that includes the calendar.

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<sup>4</sup> Refers to a social moment imbricated in the Swedish labour movement which arose in the late 1800s (Gougoulakis 2016).

Several articles frame the Calendar as being for everyone, regardless of age, as well as allowing adults to reconnect with their childhood selves: ‘I was reminded that we are all children deep inside’ (Ernyrd 2020) and *Mirakel* as enabling a nostalgia for childhood. The annual return of the Calendar is framed as providing an opportunity to vicariously experience a sense of wonder by watching it with one’s children, as well as allowing adults to recall their favourite Calendars from childhood and discuss how well this year’s Calendar measures up to their legacy. The connection between conceptions of childhood and Christmas for Swedes has previously been noted (Löfgren 1993), and this focus on childhood accords with how the Calendar is more broadly framed in the coverage of the anniversary:

The Calendar is the TV programme most have an opinion on. One has such strong childhood memories attached to it, and like all memories, they are probably distorted by age and idealized in various ways, one wishes to return to that warm childhood feeling... (Brännström 2020).

Eva Rydberg – an actress who appeared in the Calendar *Trolltider* – is quoted as saying that the Calendar has gone from ‘being children’s television to becoming a cross-generational tradition on which everyone has an opinion. It is wonderful that children get to grow up with these memories’ (Brännström 2020). Similarly, Hanna Stjärne (CEO at SVT) says that the Calendar ‘is part of Sweden’s memory’ and a symbol of childhood (uncredited 2020).

Gårdare, interviewed in another newspaper, suggests that appealing to both children and adults has been part of a deliberate strategy since the sixties: even people in their seventies have grown up with the Calendar and write in to complain if a Calendar does not measure up (Brännström 2020). Gårdare offers some reflections on what makes a Calendar successful:

Some elements must be present for a Calendar to succeed in winning the audience’s heart. There doesn’t have to be snow, but there must be a Christmas atmosphere. It’s also good if there is some national romanticism – people especially long for a homespun Christmas and dipped candles. A ‘*Madicken*’ feel. Nordic mythology, *tomtar* and trolls, and [other beings from Nordic mythology] also work very well. I also think there must be a reflection on contemporary issues (Brännström 2020).

Notably, the first thing Gårdare mentions is a Christmas atmosphere (Swe. *julkänsla*), tying into the framing of the Calendar as especially important in

2020 because of the stress of the pandemic. This perceived function of creating a Christmas atmosphere links the Calendar to Christmas preparations, the need for which is again perceived to be greater during covid:

Miracle – that is something to wish for a Christmas like this one, it seems everyone longs to decorate, light candles, and be cosy at home. For many [...] SVT's Calendar is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to creating that special December feeling (Zandihn 2020).

This illustrates that the Calendar is framed as part of creating a Christmas atmosphere, something that is emphasized in the reporting on both *Mirakel* and the anniversary; and the depiction of the Christmas of the 1920s is continuously emphasized as the source of a Christmas atmosphere in *Mirakel*. This framing is particularly clear in an article detailing the practical ways in which readers can create a Christmas atmosphere by baking, making sweets, playing board games, making decorations, and watching previous Calendars as part of a cosy Christmas (Edling 2020). The anniversary articles also emphasize a Christmas atmosphere, accompanied by descriptions of Christmas preparations, decorating, anticipation, various types of sweets, baked goods, and drinks specific to Christmas, and mentions of folkloric beings, most frequently *tomtar*.<sup>5</sup> Although less frequently mentioned than in the anniversary articles, elements like Christmas spirit, cosiness, *julstök* (Eng. *Christmas preparations*), specific sweets and beverages, and beings like *tomtar* also appear in a few articles focusing on *Mirakel*. These elements are not necessarily used in describing *Mirakel* or other Calendars but rather are part of evoking a sense of Christmas cosiness in the reader and emphasizing the importance of the ritualistic Christmas preparations in the Swedish celebration (cf. Löfgren 1993).

The Calendar is framed as connected to children and childhood, and a few anniversary articles point to it as a source of strong nostalgic feelings. Everyone is said to have a favourite, and the reporting on the anniversary focuses on recounting favourite and influential Calendars. The most frequently named is *Mysteriet på Greveholm*, followed by *Teskedsgumman*,<sup>6</sup> *Titteliture*, *Mirakel*, *Trolltider*, *Pelle Svanslös*, and *Sunes jul*. The mention of these Calendars is unsurprising: *Titteliture* was the first televised Calendar; *Teskedsgumman* and *Trolltider* were both classic Calendars that later aired as

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<sup>5</sup> *Tomtar* is referred to slightly more frequently than *Tomten*. The latter may refer to Santa Claus, while the former does not.

<sup>6</sup> *Mysteriet på Greveholm* and *Teskedsgumman* were the two most frequently mentioned things in general in the anniversary articles.

regular children's programming in the nineties; and *Mysteriet på Greveholm* and *Sunes jul* were both very well received calendars, airing in 1996 and 1991 respectively. These four Calendars are thus likely to illicit nostalgia from people born in the eighties and early nineties, which may say more about the age of the journalists than these Calendars' broader popularity. However, given the role newspapers have played in cementing particular understandings of Swedish traditions (Johnsen and Johansen 2021; Löfgren 1993; Strömberg 2017), journalists' role in establishing a canon of good Calendars against whose legacy new Calendars are measured should not be overlooked.

Indeed, the most frequently mentioned thing in articles about *Mirakel* is assurances that it 'lives up' to the expectations of the Calendar. Related to this are frequent comparisons with the previous year's *Panik i tomteverkstan*, which, unlike *Mirakel*, was poorly received. The anniversary coverage frames the calendar as a beloved tradition and simultaneously as the centre of a heated debate:

Debates about the Calendar have – on the culture pages and in *fikarum*<sup>7</sup> and at dinner tables – covered things like alcohol consumption, the absence of a Swedish Christmas atmosphere, connections with Christianity that are too vague or too strong, excessive product placement or political propaganda, a lack of solemnity, a lack of ease [...] The question is, what will this year's topic of debate be? Probably nothing, according to my prediction. Except in the closed circles of the so-called friends of Sweden, who in their troll forums complain about 'politically correct' feminist or climate crisis elements (Janson 2020).

However, the reporting about *Mirakel* was not without controversy. This was mainly related to the depiction of HVB homes and adoption practices in Sweden,<sup>8</sup> which were described as damaging to children living in such homes (never in articles reviewing *Mirakel* but rather in notices specifically detailing this critique). Another minor source of controversy that is nonetheless illustrative of the position of the Calendar surrounds the *folkbildande* elements of *Mirakel*.

Something about Sweden that's such fun is how highly we regard social realism – that is, raw depictions of life when it is at its worst. [...] Not even SVT's children's Calendar is safe. It is otherwise an escape from the boredom

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<sup>7</sup> Refers to a place where one has *fika*. This usually refers to lunchrooms: calling them *fika* rooms has a particular connotation similar to 'water cooler talk'.

<sup>8</sup> HVB homes – homes for care or habitation – are facilities that aim to care and/or house people of all ages run by municipalities (regulated by social services).

of midwinter. A shimmering Christmas atmosphere – is that too much to ask for? Apparently (Magnusson 2020).

The social realistic elements of *Mirakel* are perhaps not readily apparent, but it does have some elements that were positioned as '*folkbildande*' in the news coverage: class disparities, gender roles (both solely referring to the 1920s), and to a lesser extent climate commentary. Gårdare positions the presence of such educational elements or reflections on contemporary issues as important for a successful Calendar. The descending order of class, gender, and climate commentary corresponds to the weight these themes were given in *Mirakel*, and the frequency with which they were mentioned in the articles. In contrast to the above commentary on these elements as depressive, these features of *Mirakel* were overwhelmingly framed as a good thing in much of the press coverage, which emphasized how *Mirakel* could be used by parents to facilitate conversations with their children about these topics, eased by the sense of comfort the Calendar provides. *Mirakel* was thus framed as 'steeped in the best Swedish children's programming tradition' (Ernryd 2020).

*Mirakel* and the Calendar more broadly was thus framed as evoking strong nostalgic feelings, as living up to the legacy of a beloved institution. The Calendar was also framed as an integral part of Christmas, connecting Swedes with their childhoods, and perhaps even part of Sweden's memory. How the framing of *Mirakel* slots it into a schema of symbols evoking a Christmas atmosphere and as part of Christmas preparations illustrates how newspapers in Sweden continue to be an important part of 'the reproduction of tradition', with its own vocabulary of 'grinning gnomes, the gleaming candles, the sparkling eyes of the children' (Löfgren 1993, 224); a standardization against which readers can measure their own Christmas. Moreover, while ostensibly for children, the Calendar was framed as being for everyone and emphasized as being inclusive and comforting for everyone watching. At the same time the framing of the Calendar in the newspapers continuously emphasized the national elements of *Mirakel*, and how quintessentially Swedish its depiction of Sweden was perceived as.

### **Religious nostalgia in the Christmas Calendar**

The 2020 Calendar *Mirakel* – a pun combining the names of the two main characters Mira and Raket to form the word 'miracle' – is aligned in its depiction of a 1920s Christmas with a noted trend towards nostalgia in contemporary television (Niemeyer and Wentz 2014). It is thus presented as an appeal to

different modes of nostalgia, both in the aesthetic depiction of the 1920s – especially with reference to classic children’s programming depicting past versions of Sweden (such as film adaptations of Astrid Lindgren’s work, most readily *Madicken*) – and in its function as a Calendar. The association with *Madicken* illustrates the particular national romantic tropes with which *Mirakel* plays, namely that of a manor house Christmas (the other popular trope being that of a Swedish peasant Christmas; Löfgren 1993). Thematically, *Mirakel* touches on broad issues like the advancement of women’s rights, class differences, and climate change, the depiction of which remains somewhat ambivalent throughout the series. The narrative focuses on an orphan girl, Mira, in 2020 who does not care about Christmas and her path to finding a family and enjoyment in the celebration of Christmas (cf. the typical adult role in the Danish Christmas calendar; Agger 2013). This contrasts with the story of an entitled upper-class girl, Rakel, in 1920, centred on her breaking free of sexist conventions and her growing class consciousness, facilitated by her experiences in 2020. In the following sections I highlight the elements used in constructing the 1920 and 2020 Christmases in *Mirakel*.

*The elements of Christmas, then and now*

The two Christmases are depicted with contrasting elements. The 2020 depiction includes a bricolage of Swedish and international elements, presented variously with earnestness and ironic distance. In the first episode Galad (an unaccompanied refugee, and the only other child living in the HVB home with Mira) is trying to create a Christmas atmosphere – ‘how will Christmas come if no one untangles all the lights?’ (Åstrand 2020, Kapitel 1, 8:28), a phrasing that emphasizes the long run up of the preparations for Christmas and their significance for creating a Christmas atmosphere – a crucial feature of the Swedish Christmas (Löfgren 1993) – contrasted with Mira’s apparent disdain for the holiday, illustrated by her responding to Galad by defiantly playing a song with an anti-Christmas message (Kapitel 1).<sup>9</sup> Other elements in the 2020 bricolage include a sparkling pink Christmas tree (Kapitel 2), the hanging of mistletoe, ‘Deck the Halls With Holly’ playing in the background in the final episode (Kapitel 24), the celebration of Lucia (Kapitel 13), pomander balls on display (Kapitel 24), Christmas sweets like *glögg* (sweet mulled wine Kapitel 3), Galad building a tower-

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9 ‘Det är inte snön som faller’ by Anders Rönnblom, initially released as part of a Christmas album in 1980. Rönnblom’s song paints a picture of decay, fascism, and violence, notably referring to the absence of children to illustrate the emptiness of the holiday.

ing gingerbread house, and frequent mention of *skumtomtar* (a sweet sold around Christmas in the shape of a *tomte*); one character mentions baking because they ‘deserve some Christmas atmosphere’ (Kapitel 8, 0:58), and later refers to a breakfast he serves as *mysfrukost* (a compound of breakfast and cosy, Kapitel 21, 4:46).<sup>10</sup> These are all examples of *julfika*, a compound of Christmas and *fika*; the latter refers to a social institution in Sweden centred on the eating of pastries or sweets while drinking coffee with family, friends, or colleagues.<sup>11</sup>

Much like in 2020, the tone for the 1920 Christmas is set by music. In the first episode Rakel sings a popular Swedish Christmas song with Christian elements (*‘Gläns över sjö och strand’*) for her family and servants, who are then forced to compliment her singing, even though she sings off key; this not only contrasts with the punk song in 2020 but also highlights the class differences in 1920. In 1920 Rakel’s mother is responsible for creating a Christmas atmosphere, and we see her urging Rakel to write a letter to *Tomten* (Kapitel 1).<sup>12</sup> Other elements include the family decorating the Christmas tree (Kapitel 11), later contrasted with the servants decorating their own, smaller, tree, emphasizing class differences (Kapitel 22), wrapping Christmas presents and sealing them with wax while singing carols (Kapitel 21), and visiting the annual Christmas market during *Tomasdagen*<sup>13</sup> accompanied by carols sung in the background (Kapitel 21). There is also a strong focus on food and the preparation of food from scratch in 1920 – making liver pâté, for example (Kapitel 5).

### *Ambivalent nostalgia in Mirakel*

*Mirakel*’s depiction of Christmas in 1920 accords with Niemeyer’s and Wentz’s observation that television tends towards a complex relationship

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10 ‘Mys’ or ‘mysig’ is similar to the Danish concept *hygge*. A key component of creating a Christmas atmosphere and of Swedish culture in general.

11 The social significance of *fika* might be compared to grabbing a pint at the local pub in Britain or an aperitif in France. While the types of sociality implied by these activities differ, how they are woven through the fabric of the respective hegemonic cultures of Britain and France is similar.

12 The contemporary version of *Tomten* bears similarities to Santa Claus and is increasingly inspired by American popular culture. Strömberg (2017) speculates that there may be a link between the Swedish version and Judas with the bag, who was featured in the early Lucia carnivals (1928) and may have been a feature of the Christmas spectacles that preceded it. Despite sharing a name, *Tomten* is distinct from the *tomte*, which instead refers to a type of guardian spirit attached to a house or property.

13 St Thomas’s Day is on 21 December. It was then an important holiday in Sweden.

with nostalgia, complicating notions that seek to exclusively link 'nostalgia to a more or less unrealistic past, adorning its portrayal exclusively with affirmative and positive feelings' (Niemeyer and Wentz 2014, 130). *Mirakel* thus seeks to problematize the past in favour of the present while relying on the aesthetic image of the past to convey a Christmas atmosphere. Despite the apparent critical lens applied to the 1920s, there are some ambivalences in this depiction. For example, while a family feud which starts in 1920 is not resolved until Christmas Eve 2020 – with the handing over of a Christmas present from one heir to the other – the Christmas Eve celebration in 1920 contains a softening of the class divide, as the family patriarch includes the servants in the family Christmas celebration (Kapitel 24). This is in line with a more idyllic depiction specifically of Christmas Eve, which has characterized the contemporary Calendar and works to de-emphasize the familial tension of the 1920 Christmas and instead presents a congenial Christmas atmosphere in both periods in the final episode (which aired on the morning of Christmas Eve).

In other words, while *Mirakel* seeks to present an image of 1920 that emphasizes negative features like class divides, they are muted in the final episode, which may appeal 'to an undifferentiated emotion generated by an unreal, synthetic, universal image of the past' and thus risks affecting 'an ahistorical defense of the status quo' (DaSilva and Faught 1982, 49). By status quo I here refer to the implied essence of Swedishness that *Mirakel* affects, a clearer example of which is Rakel's apparently easy acceptance of immigration. Notably, Rakel appears mostly unfazed by the presence of Galad, Mira's teacher, and non-white students in 2020 (e.g. Kapitel 12). If anything, she identifies it as something wonderful, telling Galad 'you have people from all over the world – I have seen folk today from countries I did not know existed!' (Kapitel 12, 12:05), while listing the numerous ways in which she thinks 2020 is better than 1920.

The inclusion of visual diversity largely appears to be an aesthetic choice rather than something which affects the narrative, characterization, or experience of being in Sweden in any tangible way. Galad is introduced as an unaccompanied refugee, but beyond this we learn nothing about his family, country of origin, or cultural heritage. His two defining characteristics are his devotion to Mira and his love for Christmas. The only real hint at a discussion of racism comes when Mira's teacher talks about the Lucia procession held at school, where everyone can be whatever they want except a gingerbread man. The only explanation she offers is 'we've stopped doing that' (Kapitel 13, 8:06; probably a reference to a recurring public debate in

Sweden that began in earnest in 2012 about whether children dressing up as gingerbread for Lucia was racist). Rakel's acceptance of diversity can be contrasted both with the absolute confusion she displays towards technology (she hugs and pets a robot vacuum cleaner for comfort; Kapitel 3) and her immediate identification of someone she encounters in 2020 with visible tattoos as a pirate (Kapitel 6). Sweden in 1920 is thus depicted in a way that both emphasizes the negative features of the past in favour of the future and glosses over them in ways that appear to render them accidental. Today's more equitable Sweden is thus rendered more indicative of the essence of Swedishness across time.

Another ambivalence that conversely complicates the positive depiction of present-day Sweden is the depiction of Christmas ham and gingerbread biscuits. In episode 15 we see Rakel's father reverently slicing a piece of ham, eating it, and declaring 'now it's Christmas!', to which his wife replies 'so the ham passes muster?' (Kapitel 15, 3:58), emphasizing the centrality of the Christmas ham to the celebration and the Christmas atmosphere. This is contrasted with Agneta (the woman running the HVB home in 2020) contriving to burn a prefabricated vegetarian 'ham' in the microwave (Kapitel 15), a contrast that illustrates the ambivalence concerning the depiction of global warming in *Mirakel*; the reverential depiction of meat and meat consumption in 1920 (exacerbated by the fact that the wealth of the 1920s family comes from owning coal mines) is contrasted with the depiction of prefabricated artificial vegetarian food in 2020. The ambivalent depiction of climate change was not noted in the reporting about *Mirakel*, which tended to take the climate change commentary at face value.

The contrast between authenticity and artificiality is not limited to vegetarian food. Another example is the making of gingerbread from scratch (including the grinding of the spices with a pestle and mortar) in 1920 (Kapitel 19), contrasted with Agneta in 2020, who unpacks shop-bought gingerbread dough while wondering if its smell will create a Christmas atmosphere (Kapitel 7); Mira later consumes this dough raw in a fit of depression (Kapitel 8). The wistful way in which Agneta asks if the smell will create a Christmas atmosphere illustrates the contrasting ways in which this atmosphere fails to manifest itself in the different periods. In 2020 the Christmas atmosphere seems to be complicated by apathy combined with sudden attempts to enact it, whereas 1920 is continuously steeped in the preparations for Christmas, and the Christmas atmosphere is instead complicated by the family feud between Rakel's father and uncle. Indeed, the family feud and its impact on Christmas is illustrated by how Rakel's

mother presenting gingerbread biscuits made for each family member – including the offending uncle, which upsets her husband, who declares that the uncle has left the family as he picks up the biscuit and snaps it in two (Kapitel 19).

Some of the main distinctions between the elements used in the construction of the respective Christmases are the presence (in 1920) and absence (in 2020) of Christian elements. However, even in 1920 the inclusion of Christian imagery appears secondary, mainly occurring in the background through the singing of carols or in passing through unironic mentions of God (though these are infrequent). For example, there is no mention of the church or depiction of church attendance. This is contrasted with Mira, who at one point prays to God:

Please, please, please God. I know that I have said a lot of mean things about you, like how you don't exist, otherwise there wouldn't be wars and cancer and stinging nettles, but I need your help (Kapitel 6, 6:05).

Later in the same episode she again calls out to God, saying God will be given a 'one hundred and fourth' chance to help her (Kapitel 6, 12:06). In instances like these *Mirakel* relies on ironic nostalgia, creating an idyllic image while maintaining ironic distance through a contrast with 2020, which is repeatedly identified as better than 1920 in relation to the social issues of women's rights and class division. This idea of ironic nostalgia builds on Schiermer's and Carlson's extension of Boym's (2007) categorization of nostalgia as restorative, reflective, or ironic. Schiermer and Carlson explain that while restorative nostalgia idealizes and seeks to restore an imagined past, reflective nostalgia, while idealizing the past, remains aware of its irretrievability. They suggest that ironic nostalgia is a comment on restorative nostalgia, which 'performs ironic distance by furnishing content and ritual with extreme or absurd significance; it thus enforces collective bonds through an over-identification with the object, and the depiction and exaggeration of its most failed traits' (Schiermer and Carlsen 2017, 171–72). The distance enabled by irony thus undercuts the Christmas card image of the 1920s, while maintaining some of the features of restorative nostalgia, especially in the depiction of food preparation but also in how the issue of class is glossed over in the final episode in favour of affecting a cosy Christmas atmosphere. The historian Joe Perry has suggested that this type of narrative structure, where 'holiday interactions between rich and poor typically portrayed utopian visions of social harmony, in which small acts

of bourgeois charity alleviated harsh social inequalities' (Perry 2020, 452), is part of the national romantic tradition, again emphasizing how *Mirakel* plays with national romantic ideals.

### **Chains of memory in the Christmas Calendar**

In its depiction of the 1920s *Mirakel* affirms the Christian linkages of Christmas while downplaying the significance of religiosity by lending the depiction a quaint quality. This appears to correspond with how Kittelman-Flensner (2015) describes students affirming the Christian roots of Christmas while disavowing religious linkages; imagined as a distinction between practice/tradition, and belief. Johnsen and Johanssen suggest that such a 'coding of Christianity as culture – particularly at Christmas – facilitates "secular normality" in which central religiously coded elements [...] are made invisible', contributing to a negotiation of 'Christian cultural heritage as culture, not religion' (Johnsen and Johansen 2021, 231, 251). The distinction between practice/tradition and religion is interesting, especially as the former is associated with nostalgia in the reporting about the Calendar, whereas Christian sentiments are only mentioned in passing as something that has caused controversy around the Calendar in the past.

Modernization and the attendant processes of mediatization and commodification mean that nostalgia is frequently mobilized through and in relation to popular culture (Niemeyer and Wentz 2014), where the 'past is transformed into a warehouse in which ideas and artifacts are stored for use as reconstituted commodities' (DaSilva and Faught 1982, 59). This is akin to the notion of banal religion, which refers to religion as a commodity dispersed in public discourse, outside politics and inside culture, not in content explicitly dealing with religion as such, but as marginal phenomena appearing 'in relation to issues and stories that have no explicit, elaborate or intentional religious meaning' (Hjarvard 2012, 34); evoked to connote authenticity but rarely to sell a religious message (Hjarvard 2012). Nor does *Mirakel* attempt to convey a religious message or frame it as one. Although belief in God is present to some extent in the depiction of the 1920s, it is not foregrounded and appears to be more in service of an 'authentic' depiction. The only person who directly attempts communication with God during the series is Mira, who does so in a way that marks ironic distance. *Mirakel* thus balances ironic and earnest attitudes towards the holiday, tending towards the former in the earlier part of the series and focusing on the latter especially in the final episode.

While Christmas in 1920 is depicted as a nostalgic *aesthetic* object, the depiction of social inequalities – primarily class divisions and women’s rights – is framed as belonging to the past, something Sweden has moved beyond, and thus not something that affects children growing up in 2020. This is a curious choice given that the children we follow in 2020 are an orphan and an unaccompanied refugee. Even more egregious is the depiction of 1920 and 2020 as both unaffected by racist biases. As DaSilva and Faught has noted, ‘nostalgia may become an ahistorical defense of the status quo [...] inhibiting a realistic appraisal of contemporary social relations’ (DaSilva and Faught 1982, 49). The pedagogical qualities *Mirakel* is framed as having in Swedish newspapers appears to have been primarily directed towards how much better Sweden is now.

Hervieu-Léger has pointed to Sweden specifically as an example of an ‘ethicosymbolic imbrication of ethnics and religion in modernity’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 160), meaning that the type of banal elements with which *Mirakel* plays can be seen as attempting to re-establish a sense of ‘we’ that ‘modernity has at once fractured and created a nostalgia for’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 157). Cultural practices, celebrations, and beliefs that involve folkloric elements are present in the newspapers’ framing of both the Calendar in general and *Mirakel* in particular. *Mirakel* is framed as part of the ritualistic preparations leading up to Christmas; such writing mobilizes various elements which may work to re-establish a connection with ideas of cultural heritage. For example, one article describes a family’s Christmas preparations such as making tree decorations and the children wishing for a miracle and explaining that they have ‘a *nisse* [*tomte*] in our home who plays tricks’ (Drath 2020). This article is filled with elements making up Christmas – baubles, angels, stars, crackers, stockings, Lucia, *tomten* – that, much like the elements from the 2020 depiction of Christmas in *Mirakel*, include a mixture of specific Scandinavian and more generally western Christian elements.

Nostalgia is a social emotion that exists in relation to others, enforcing a sense of connection (Sedikides and Wildschut 2019). In relation to the Calendar this sense may be strengthened by habitually watching it every morning (or evening) at the same time every year (cf. Niemeyer and Wentz 2014); something one does with family with the awareness that everyone else is doing the same with theirs (cf. Schiermer and Carlsen 2017). This knowledge further ties into associations between the Calendar, national feast days, and national identity. The type of mediatized nostalgia represented by the Calendar thus potentially contributes to a sense of belonging to an ingroup, strengthening ethnocentrism and simultaneously contributing to the exclusion

of others (Sedikides and Wildschut 2019). It is interesting to consider how the Calendar is framed by the newspapers via interviews with key people at SVT as simultaneously being for everyone, as well as playing on a particularly Swedish tradition of children's television, preferably containing national romantic elements, and as something that is part of 'Sweden's memory'.

It is pertinent to ask if this nostalgia is mobilized in response to perceived threats to national identity (building on work by Routledge et al. 2011, who argue that nostalgia is an important component of meaning-providing structures), similar to Zuckerman's argument that religion may be strengthened in the Scandinavian countries when such identities are perceived to be under threat 'as a pillar of ethnic, communal, national, or cultural defense' (Zuckerman 2009, 62). The depiction in *Mirakel* and its framing by newspapers suggests a view of Sweden as an open and equal country that may once have had some issues in the past, but that no longer does. Yet even this depiction of issues in the past is ambivalent, exemplified by the softening of the class critique in the final episode. This appears to be a result of how the 2020 Calendar relates to Christmas as a nostalgic object; moving from an ironic depiction of Christmas and Christianity more broadly to a restorative approach, especially in the Christmas Eve episode, which undercuts the distance established at the start in favour of establishing a cosy Christmas atmosphere. The idea of restorative nostalgia corresponds to nostalgia functioning as a defence against change, and as providing a sense of stability or continuity with the past (May 2017): addressing a loss of identity in modern society, actualizing the past in the present, an attempt at patching the broken chain. The movement from an ironic position is interesting, as ironic nostalgia is first used in *Mirakel* to establish a link to the past through an identification of its failings, which are later glossed over to cement a particular image of Sweden as essentially equal, open, and diverse. This image of Sweden is firmly rooted in a particular set of cultural practices, inextricably tied to Christian elements, yet it is divorced from a clear reflection on them as either religious or potentially non-inclusive.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to ask how the Swedish televised Christmas Calendar depicts Swedish traditions, if it utilizes banal Christian and folkloric elements, and how it constructs ideas of Swedishness. In doing so, I have argued that the Calendar uses such elements to affect a backdrop of nostalgia linked to a construction of Swedishness as it relates to a specific

idea of cultural heritage and by extension to constructions of what counts as national belonging in contemporary Sweden. The analysis has focused on the use of Christian symbols, practices, and rituals, as well as on folkloric and commercial elements in the depiction of Christmas, and how this ties into ideas of Swedishness. I have argued that the depiction in *Mirakel* and Swedish newspapers' framing of *Mirakel* and the Calendar suggest a view of Sweden as an open and equal country that may have had some issues in the past which it has now overcome. Christian heritage is approached as functionally 'secularized', and the Calendar thus constitutes and maintains a chain of memory that is separate from religious authority structures yet appealing to decontextualized elements in constructing an ethno-symbolic identity for Swedes.

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