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# Christmas in Norwegian Kindergartens: How Are Muslim Children Included?

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## Abstract

Like the rest of Norwegian society, Norwegian kindergartens are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of religion. This is also reflected in the governing documents of kindergartens, which state that they should work with religion. This article explores to what extent Christmas in kindergartens is adapted to include Muslim children in the group. The article is based on interviews with six kindergarten teachers conducted between 2020 and 2022. Perspectives related to inclusion, freedom of religion, and previous research are used as a starting point to discuss the findings. The article highlights that adaptations of Christmas traditions are largely focused on ensuring that all children have the opportunity to participate in activities without being seen as practicing a specific religion. There is minimal focus on adapting the content to better suit a multireligious group of children.

## Keywords

Christmas – kindergarten – Muslim – religion – religious freedom – secularism

## 1 Introduction

Norway has become increasingly diverse and can be categorized as a multi-religious society. Islam is the second-largest religion in Norway, following

Christianity (Repstad 2020, 60). This has naturally influenced the religious backgrounds of children attending kindergarten, which in turn impacts how kindergarten teachers approach religion within these institutions. In this article, I explore how six kindergartens in Norway observe Christmas with Muslim children in their groups.

In 2020, 92% of children aged between one and five attended kindergartens in Norway (Hovdelien & Sødal 2022, 1). Governed by the Kindergarten Act (2005) and its accompanying Framework Plan (NMER 2017), Norwegian kindergartens are pedagogical institutions with a social mandate. This mandate requires kindergartens to collaborate closely with parents to ensure children's needs for care, play, learning, and personal growth are met, ultimately fostering well-rounded development. Kindergartens are expected to work in partnership with families, taking into account the religious backgrounds of both children and their parents.

The Framework Plan (NMER 2017) outlines objectives for kindergartens as pedagogical arenas and identifies "Ethics, Religion, and Philosophy" as one of the seven key learning areas. It specifies that staff should introduce children to and observe significant dates, holidays, and customs in the Christian tradition, as well as those from other religions and worldviews represented in the kindergarten (NMER 2017, 55). This article investigates how this objective is implemented in practice, uncovering the strategies employed by educators to navigate religious diversity.

I will present and discuss a selection of material from a study focusing on how kindergarten teachers in Norwegian kindergartens engage with Islam. The empirical data is derived from interviews conducted with six kindergarten teachers between September 2020 and December 2022.

The period leading up to Christmas with its myriad activities related to the religious holiday, is a unique time in most Norwegian kindergartens, posing ethical and practical challenges in multi-religious settings. In this article, I explore how these challenges are addressed in practice. By looking at the extent to which kindergarten teachers adapt activities and traditions related to Christmas when Muslim children are present in the kindergarten, I examine to what degree this promotes an inclusive practice. My research question in this article is: How are Muslim children included in the Christmas observation in Norwegian kindergartens?

These findings will be discussed by using the concepts inclusion and religious freedom, arguing that both these terms influence the decisions made by the kindergarten teachers. This research will contribute to a better understanding

of the complexities involved in accommodating diverse religious beliefs in educational settings and hopefully provide valuable insights for educators.

## 2 Background and Relevance

The framework plan states that the learning area Ethics, Religion, and Philosophy “focuses especially on kindergartens’ social mandate and core values in a society with a multitude of worldviews” (2017, 54). At the same time, research shows that when kindergartens work with religion, it is often done in a way that highlights the majority and makes the minorities invisible (Krogstad & Hidle 2015; Krogstad 2017; Toft & Rosland 2014; Hovdelien 2012). This is particularly evident in the way Christmas and Easter are emphasized, while other religious celebrations receive remarkably less attention or are ignored altogether (Krogstad 2017). As Christmas receives the most extensive focus in Norwegian kindergartens, I am examining to what extent Muslim children are included in these activities.

Typically, the focus on Christmas in kindergarten begins towards the end of November and continues until the kindergarten closes for the holidays. While this period coincides with the Christian observance of Advent, I refer to it as a Christmas observation in the kindergarten, since the activities usually carried out during this time are related to Christmas, such as decorating Christmas trees, hosting Santa parties, and making Christmas presents. The religious preparations associated with Advent are typically less prominent in kindergartens (Sødal 2018, 117–118).

Christianity has a distinct place in the Norwegian Framework plan for kindergartens, and it is the only religion mentioned by name (NMER 2017). This is due to Christianity’s history and position in Norwegian society. The Kindergarten Act (2005) specifies that kindergartens “must be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality, and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.” The Framework plan (2017, 55) states that the staff shall observe important dates and holidays in the Christian tradition, and in other religions and worldviews represented in the kindergarten.

Earlier research shows that non-Christian holidays are rarely observed even if non-Christian religions are represented among the children in Norwegian kindergartens. Krogstad and Hidle (2015) researched holiday observations in

kindergartens and found that among 55 kindergartens with Muslim children in the group, 38% observed Eid (2015, 9). They explain this phenomenon as minority religions being treated as something entirely different from Christianity in kindergartens. The staff at the kindergarten sees the observation of non-Christian holidays as something that is done for the individual child/family, and the fact that the observations are something that will benefit the entire group of children is not emphasized.

Krogstad (2017) researched how Norwegian kindergarten teachers interpret the framework plan regarding what the children should learn about religion and religious holidays. The study shows a large difference between the ideal expressed in the framework plan and the daily practice as described by kindergarten teachers and parents. When it comes to Christian holidays, the focus is more on traditions than on the religious content, while Muslim holidays are ignored (Krogstad 2017). These findings concur with research from several countries.

The focus on traditions and culture rather than religious content is seen in research from the other Nordic countries (Krogstad 2017; Puskás & Andersson 2017, 2022; Reimers 2020; Niemi et al. 2014; Boelskov 2015). In the Swedish context, kindergarten teachers often avoid discussing the religious aspects of these traditions and may be uncertain about how to pass on a cultural heritage that includes religious elements (Puskás & Andersson 2017; Reimers 2020). However, some researchers suggest that the familiar traditions of Christmas and Advent can be used to socialize children into a national (Swedish) community regardless of their religious or cultural background (Puskás & Andersson 2022). Puskás and Andersson's findings (2022) show how advent in kindergarten is both secular and religious, but that the traditions of advent seem so familiar that they are not recognized as religion. This link between the nation and Christmas celebration is also made visible in school and kindergarten celebrations in Finland (Niemi et al. 2014; Lappalainen 2009). Christmas celebration may act to enhance Finish identity among all pupils, but it can also be seen as exclusionary as the cultural diversity among Finnishness becomes invisible (Niemi et al. 2014, 260).

### 3 Theoretical Background

The Norwegian framework plan for kindergartens emphasizes the term "observe" over "celebrate" when it comes to religious holidays (NMER 2017, 55). This distinction is linked to the concept of religious freedom, which encompasses both the right to believe and the right to practice one's religion, as well

as what Endsjø describes as negative religious freedom (2022, 62). Negative religious freedom entails that individuals should not be compelled to live in accordance with the beliefs of others, although this does not mean they can live entirely independent of religion in society. In the context of kindergarten, this means that while children should be allowed to observe religious holidays and learn about them, they should not be required to practice or celebrate them. This is also reflected in Norwegian schools, which provide students with the right to be exempt from certain parts of the curriculum if their parents perceive it as practicing a different religion (Education Act §2–3a). However, this exemption does not apply to the factual content of the curriculum. The concept of negative religious freedom may therefore be a factor that influences how kindergarten teachers approach Christmas when Muslim children are present in the group.

This distinction between “observe” and “celebrate” emphasizes that the activities surrounding religious holidays are intended to be pedagogical in nature and not religious. The purpose is to teach children about different religions, both their own and those represented in their group. This is to promote socialization and as well as a part of the children’s identity development.

By working with religious diversity, kindergartens enable children to experience recognition and appreciate that their own backgrounds are valued parts of society and the kindergarten. By learning about the religions, values, and cultures of others, children can better understand themselves and others (Sagberg 2022, 46). Gaining knowledge about the religious celebrations observed by other children in the kindergarten is an essential component of this process. This understanding can foster awareness and reflection about their own celebrations, values, and religion, particularly if kindergarten teachers facilitate relevant activities and conversations.

The ability of kindergarten teachers to effectively address these themes is connected to their professionalism and expertise in handling diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The framework plan outlines that the kindergarten staff is responsible for fostering an *inclusive* community where children are encouraged to actively participate in their own learning and that of their peers (NMER 2017, 22).

The concept of inclusion in a kindergarten context has evolved from primarily focusing on children with special needs to encompassing various groups related to differences and diversity (Caspersen et al. 6). Inclusion now stands as an alternative to segregation for children with special needs, while it has also developed to serving as a counterpoint to assimilation when discussing migration and cultural diversity (ibid). This perspective implies that the kindergarten system should be the one to transform and accommodate

the diverse needs of children, rather than expecting the children to change or adjust to specific requirements. In essence, inclusion in kindergarten involves adapting the culture and practices of the institution to meet a varied group of children.

When discussing the observation of Christmas and Advent in a multireligious kindergarten with inclusion as a backdrop, certain expectations arise for the professionals in the kindergarten. Firstly, Christmas in kindergarten should be an observation and not a celebration, and children with different religions should be able to attend. Rather than being a celebration, it should be approached as an opportunity for learning and socialization, allowing children of different backgrounds to develop a shared understanding of Christmas. Secondly, it is important that the kindergarten teachers and staff facilitate reflection and awareness of the children's own celebrations, values, and religious or world views. Christmas observation in the kindergarten can be viewed as a small but significant practice, which, when considered in the context of inclusion and the intentions outlined in the Framework plan (2017), can promote equality, mutual respect, and active citizenship (Caspersen et al. 10).

#### 4 Methodology

This article presents some of the findings from a research project (2020–2022) that examined how various kindergartens in Norway worked with and approached Islam. The data draws on interviews with staff members from six kindergartens. The interview was conducted during Covid restrictions which meant it was difficult for the kindergartens teachers to take time to do this. This influenced my decision to only interview one person per kindergarten. These informants were strategically chosen, as I contacted kindergartens with known religious diversity among the children. The interviews were semi-structured and can be categorized as expert interviews, focusing on the informants' expertise and knowledge in a specific area rather than their personal views (Flick, 2020). The kindergarten teachers all described themselves as not really interested in religion. One is atheist and the others Christian (but not especially religious). The interviews each lasted around one hour.

The collected data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, which identifies emerging themes within the data. The observation of Christmas emerged as a prominent theme. Initially, the inclusion of this theme was not anticipated while exploring the approaches taken by kindergartens in working with Islam. In the first five interviews, the informants began discussing their engagement with Christmas when prompted to

provide examples of their work with Islam. In the sixth interview (kindergarten Blue), I specifically inquired whether they did anything differently related to Christmas when Muslim children were part of the group.

In this article, I use the term “Muslim children” as a category. By this, I refer to children with parents who identify themselves as Muslims and may also define their children as Muslim. It is important to note that those placed in this category might not have anything more in common than an affiliation to Islam and being children.

Due to the small sample size of informants, this study cannot be used to generalize about how kindergartens adapt the Christmas observation for multi-religious groups of children. However, it can provide insights into how some kindergarten staff members reflect, approach, and adapt the period leading up to Christmas for their groups of children, which include Muslims. This study may also serve as a foundation for further research.

This project has been registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. To protect their identities, both informants and kindergartens have been anonymized. The kindergartens have been given color coded names.

## 5 Findings and Analysis

All kindergarten teachers in this study have experience working with Muslim children. Kindergartens Blue and Green have a few Muslim children, typically between one and five, while Kindergarten Pink has a larger number. Kindergartens Red, Yellow, and Orange have a diverse mix of religious and cultural backgrounds. Although every informant, except the one from Kindergarten Blue, mentioned Christmas when discussing working with Islam, not all of them adapt their activities and traditions to accommodate their groups. I have chosen to focus on to what degree the kindergartens adapt their Christmas observation to include the Muslim children in the celebration. I have identified three different levels of adaptation, which I will now explain.

### 5.1 *No Adaptations*

Kindergarten Blue has not made any changes or modifications to their Christmas traditions since welcoming Muslim children into the group. The kindergarten's activities are primarily focused on arts and crafts, as well as a Christmas-themed gathering with the children each morning. The kindergarten teacher believes that since these activities have little to do with religion, they should not pose any problems. They also use to visit the local church but have not provided any additional information to Muslim parents about this,

aside from including it in the weekly plan. The kindergarten teacher has never encountered any objections to this practice, describing the Muslim parents as “easygoing when it comes to this.”

Kindergarten Red also visits the local church. The kindergarten teacher explains:

We have the church close by, and we usually go on a Christmas visit there. When it comes to this, we have had to explain to parents we assume have an Islamic background that we have a tradition that entails this. And that this means getting a story dramatized and that the children benefit from seeing what a church looks like inside. Yeah. We rarely have to argue for it. People normally think it is fine. They won't become Christian just by going to the church.

In Kindergarten Red, they don't ask about religious background when children start, so they have children they assume are Muslim. This assumption is typically based on nationality, clothing, or whether the children can eat pork. Even though they engage in dialogue with parents in the “might be Muslim” category regarding their Christmas tradition, I have placed this kindergarten in the no adaptation category. This decision is based on their reluctance to make any adaptations, even if the parents are skeptical about the church visit. According to the kindergarten teacher, a parent who does not want their child to participate in a church visit and play must be convinced to allow their child to attend.

### 5.2 *Adjustments as a “Backup”*

Kindergartens Green, Yellow, and Pink have a strategy based on thorough dialogue with Muslim parents concerning Advent and Christmas. They explain this by stating that not everyone wants to be part of Christmas. They emphasize providing Muslim parents with information about their planned activities and their reasons, allowing parents to make informed choices without fear. In these kindergartens, most Muslim parents want their children to participate in all activities. However, if some parents object, the kindergartens organize alternative activities for those children. They adapt as a backup to their traditions and activities.

Kindergarten Pink also organizes visits to the church (as well as to a mosque related to Eid). The kindergarten teacher explains:

We explain that when we go to the church, it is not about preaching about Christianity but learning and acquiring knowledge about Christianity and Christmas. So, we usually reassure the parents, and it has not really



become a big thing. But we try to be understanding if someone chooses something else. Which I also think we should be.

Kindergartens Green and Yellow also emphasize that they use the period around Christmas to discuss different religions and various ways of believing. They usually talk about Eid during this time, as they don't have their own Eid observation. The kindergarten teacher in kindergarten number three put it this way:

We have not observed the [Islamic] holidays, but during our holiday highlighted that there are several religions and several ways of believing.

### 5.3 *Adaptations*

Among the six kindergartens, Kindergarten Orange is particularly noteworthy for its adaptations to accommodate Muslim children in the group. With over 30 years of experience incorporating Muslim children into their programs, this kindergarten has made significant changes to its Christmas traditions. For instance, they no longer visit the local church, but instead, they organize a "Santa party" and create Christmas decorations. Much of the Christian content associated with Christmas has been removed.

The kindergarten teacher stated:

We also sing Christmas carols, but not explicitly Christian ones. Father Christmas isn't actually Christian either, or that point could be up for debate, perhaps?

Kindergarten Orange has shifted its focus to the more secular aspects of Christmas, distancing the celebration from its Christian roots to some extent. However, the kindergarten teacher explains that they still specifically discuss what she describes as the Christian message with the children.

## 6 Discussion

This article reveals that, while Christmas is often used as an example of how kindergartens work with Islam, there is relatively little adaptation when it comes to observing Christmas with Muslim children in the group. The concepts of inclusion and religious freedom will be used to discuss these findings. The study shows that adaptations made by kindergartens are primarily focused on ensuring that everyone is able to attend the activities. This is

achieved through providing information and explanations, removing religious content, and providing alternative activities for those who cannot participate. There seems to be little focus on adapting the activities and traditions to make sure the period leading up to Christmas is meaningful for all the children participating in the kindergarten.

If activities and traditions related to observing Christmas in kindergarten are viewed as pedagogical activities aimed at both learning and socialization, it is important that as many children as possible attend, regardless of their religious background. However, this should not come at the expense of religious freedom. Kindergartens Green, Yellow, and Pink prioritize communication with parents to ensure that children can participate in as many activities as possible. If parents do not want their children to participate in certain activities, alternative activities are provided. While this approach takes religious freedom into account, it is not necessarily an inclusive practice. Considering that activities related to Christmas in the kindergarten aim to provide children with knowledge and contribute to their socialization, it is equally important for Muslim children to participate. It can be argued that those children who do not celebrate Christmas may benefit the most from participating in these activities, as they may not receive this type of input elsewhere. From an inclusion perspective, it may be more appropriate to explore alternative ways of achieving the intended outcomes of the activity for the entire group if some children are unable to attend.

Some kindergartens choose activities that may be seen as problematic by some parents, such as visiting a church. The kindergartens have different strategies for approaching parents when such situations arise. Kindergartens Green, Yellow, and Pink focus on establishing a dialogue with parents and providing information so that they can make informed choices. However, Kindergarten Red's approach is to persuade parents to allow their children to attend church, which raises concerns about religious freedom. While it can be argued that this approach secures the learning outcomes and socialization of Muslim children, it is closer to assimilation than inclusion. Kindergartens should not overstep parents' religious convictions and should be cautious when attempting to do so. This practice is not only problematic in terms of inclusion and religious freedom, but also questionable in terms of professionalism among kindergarten teachers. As kindergarten teachers, they are expected to engage in ethical and critical reflection on the practices and choices made in the kindergarten (NMER 2017, p. 38), particularly with regard to power dynamics. It is concerning that a kindergarten would pressure parents into allowing their children to participate in a church visit.

Kindergarten Orange has adopted a different approach to accommodate their multireligious group of children by removing much of the Christian content from their Christmas observation. While this approach ensures that non-Christian children's religious freedom is not violated, it may not be the best practice for inclusion. Inclusion in this context means learning about Christmas, not just participating in the secular parts of it. Although the kindergarten teacher discusses the "Christian message" with the children, most of the Christian content has been removed. The focus seems to be on ensuring that everyone can attend, but not necessarily on why Christmas is celebrated. However, experiencing certain Christmas activities with other children is an important part of both learning and socialization, even if it is more directed toward the secular aspects of Christmas.

Although two of the kindergarten teachers mentioned using December to talk about different religions, there seems to be little focus on adapting activities and traditions to make the Christmas observation meaningful for all children attending. For kindergartens that do not observe Eid (such as Orange, Blue, Green, and Yellow), Christmas was mentioned as a time where they also talked about Eid. This can be a way to facilitate reflection and awareness of Muslim children's own celebrations and religion, contributing to making this period more meaningful for them. The kindergarten teachers described this as a way to draw parallels for Muslim children and show non-Muslim children that there are different religions with different celebrations. Conversations like this can contribute to a more inclusive environment in the kindergarten, displaying that all religions have a place. This promotes identity-formation for all children in the kindergarten and promotes equality, mutual respect, and active citizenship. These conversations would also be beneficial during Christmas observation in kindergartens that observe Eid (which strictly all kindergartens with Muslim children should do according to the Framework plan of 2017).

Although the kindergartens differ in how they adapt their Christmas observation to include Muslim children, there appears to be a common perception that it is important for non-Christian children to attend. The goal seems to be the children's attendance, whether achieved through convincing parents to allow their children to attend church or by removing religious content from the Christmas activities. This finding is surprising given that none of the kindergarten teachers expressed an interest in Christianity or religion. This emphasis on Christmas may be due to its recognition as a part of the national culture in Norway, much like how it is viewed as an essential part of "Swedishness" (Puskás & Andersson 2022) and "Finnishness" (Niemi et al. 2014). Additionally, Puskás and Andersson's (2022) findings suggest that advent traditions may

be so familiar that they are not recognized as religion, which could also contribute to this focus on Christmas. This may explain why kindergartens such as Orange and Blue specify that their Christmas activities have little to do with Christianity. In that respect the focus of having everyone participate in Christmas observation can be seen as an attempt to include everyone in Norwegian culture. Even though this might be intended as an inclusive practice it may also exclude those who do not view Christmas as a part of their cultural identity and could create a sense of otherness or marginalization.

Observing Christmas in a religiously diverse kindergarten can be challenging, requiring careful consideration and reflection on pedagogical goals and content, as well as good communication with parents. While there is a focus on ensuring religious freedom, creating a truly inclusive environment where all children can gain knowledge and socialization is equally important. This requires a high professionalism by kindergarten teachers and it is worth noting that religion has been identified as a challenging topic for Norwegian kindergarten teachers to navigate (Hovdelien & Sødal 2022). As such, continued reflection and discussion on this topic is necessary to improve the inclusive practices of kindergartens.

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