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Religion in Children’s Visual Media: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Preschool Holiday Specials

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ABSTRACT

Children adopt lifelong attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs from media messages, yet little is known about what messages visual media send to children on religion. This study addresses this literature gap by analyzing depictions of religion in holiday specials aired in 2018 from three top preschool networks: *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids*. Using qualitative content analysis, this study reveals that preschool holiday specials are shifting away from more in-depth portrayals of diverse religions toward commercialized, generalized, and secularized portrayals of Christmas. Although Chanukah and other non-Christmas religious holiday specials are, on average, older and less common than Christmas specials, they portray non-Christmas traditions in greater religious depth than the more recent and numerous Christmas specials portray Christmas. These findings illumine American religious holiday practices and attitudes and provide insights for enhancing media literacy on religion in children’s media and for understanding television’s potential influence on children’s perceptions of religion.

The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is the season for holiday specials in children’s television. *Disney*, *Nickelodeon*, *PBS Kids*, and other channels for young viewers air dozens of holiday specials in late November through December. Images of presents, Christmas trees, and even occasionally menorahs and kinara candles proliferate across children’s screens. However, while holiday specials are some of the first and most significant mediated exposures children have to religious holidays, religion and media studies scholars have yet to study these specials’ portrayals of religion and their influence on children’s understandings of and attitudes toward religion.

In fact, scholars have paid little attention to religion in children’s visual media at all. Currently, religion and media studies scholarship focuses heavily on representations of religion in adult visual media. These studies analyze depictions of religion in a variety of films and television shows as well as patterns in these depictions and changes in patterns over time. According to Stout (2011), two major themes have emerged from this research: “(1) Organized religion is increasingly to be found in a number of different media,” and “(2) the elements of religion (i.e. ritual, deep feeling, belief, and community) are experienced through media of popular culture” (p. 2). Religion and media studies scholars also explore the implications of these themes, especially how religion in the media influences viewers’ religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Lynch & Mitchell, 2012). Such explorations are

critical and relevant in the modern digital age, considering how visual media is one of the most influential and pervasive forces in Americans' lives today. According to a 2018 study by the Nielsen Company, the average U.S. adult spends over nine hours per day consuming media, five hours of which include watching television and films. Thus, much of what people think about themselves, others, and the world around them comes from the media, and the media shape much of U.S. culture, including religious culture (Lynch & Mitchell, 2012). By investigating the portrayal of religion in visual media, scholars have therefore deepened their understandings of the complex relationship between media and society.

While religion and media studies scholars continue to expand their research on religion in adult visual media, they have yet to explore with much breadth the portrayal of religion in children's visual media. This literature gap is surprising considering how the media strongly influence children's behavioral, cognitive, and moral development (Bjorklund & Causey, 2018). As Bandura asserts in his widely-supported Social Cognitive Theory, the chief ways in which humans understand themselves, the world, and their place in the world "is learned observationally through modeling," especially through modeling found in visual media (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). Children therefore adopt lifelong attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs from what they see on screens, which the average child 8-years-old and under spends two hours per day watching (Common Sense Media, 2017). Thus, by failing to address how the media portray religious practices and convictions to its youngest and most impressionable audiences, scholars are missing a critical opportunity to understand the pervasiveness and power of religion in children's media.

This study aims to address both the literature gap in religion and media studies and, most importantly, the need to identify messages visual media send to children on religion by using qualitative content analysis (QCA) to explore how three of the top preschool television networks, *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids*, portray religion in their holiday specials aired in December of 2018. Ultimately, this study reveals that preschool holiday specials have increasingly moved away from more in-depth portrayals of diverse religions toward commercialized, generalized, and secularized portrayals of Christmas. By calling attention to religion in children's visual media, the findings from this analysis provide broad insights on the celebration of religious winter holidays in American culture as well as specific insights on how televised religious messages potentially influence children's understandings of and attitudes toward religion. Therefore, in addition to its scholarly contribution, this study has implications for parents and religious leaders by helping them critically discuss the prevalence and influence of religion in children's television and for increasing their media literacy on the subject.

Need for Attention to Religion in Children's Visual Media

The subject of religion in adult visual media has emerged as a popular area of research in the field of religion and media studies. Within the past fifteen years, scholars from various disciplines have begun to examine if and how movies aimed at audiences ages 13 and above depict religion through plotlines, subtexts, and symbolism. While many of these studies, including Kozlovic's "Sacred Cinema" (2007), focus on Christian undertones in films, a number of analyses, such as books by Gertel (2003) and Suh (2015), consider portrayals of Judaism and Buddhism on screen. Likewise, several scholarly articles discuss depictions of various religions in popular adult television programming, ranging from animated

sitcoms such as *South Park* (Scott, 2011) to drama series such as *Mad Men* (Moulaison, 2016). In these studies, scholars oftentimes use their findings to gain insights on the role of religion in contemporary society. For example, in De los Santos et al.'s (2018) content analysis of *The Newsroom* and *The West Wing*, researchers conclude that both shows provide “a window into the civil religion of the wider entertainment and news media” (p. 41). Overall, the wide attention to the portrayal of religion in adult visual media has helped scholars better understand the powerful and complex inter-relationships between media, religion, and society.

While literature on religion in adult visual media continues to proliferate, religion in children's visual media is vastly understudied. A small handful of researchers, such as Warren (2005) and her study on the Christian hit *Veggie Tales*, have analyzed explicitly religious visual media for children. In addition, some scholars have looked at whether religion is present in non-religious children's shows and whether there is a relationship between children's media use and children's spirituality. For example, Akseer et al. (2010) used questionnaires to survey children on the prevalence of religious messages in their media, and researchers found that children were not likely to report issues of religiosity or spirituality in children's television and films. However, researchers admitted several limitations to their study, including a “lack of explicit questions involving religiosity/spirituality” and self-report bias (p. 55). Similarly, Yust (2014) examined how digital culture, including online gaming and social-networking, functions as a spiritually-enriching force in children's lives, but she did not directly address the prevalence of traditional religion in children's media and its effects on children's understanding of and attitudes toward religion. Searches on Google Scholar and numerable academic databases also indicate that no scholarly works critically analyze depictions of religion in general films and television shows directed at children. Therefore, more research is necessary to discover both what messages children's films and television programs send on religion and how those messages influence young viewers.

In order to answer this question about the influence of televised portrayals of religion on children, it is important to understand how, in general, screens shape the attitudes, behaviors, and minds of young audiences. Research on the subject of television and child development is extensive and cannot be fully summarized in this literature review, but I will highlight a few key conclusions which relate to the following analysis and discussion. First, scholars agree that television is a primary source through which children come to see and understand the world. Studies on preschool television such as those by Akerman et al. (2011) and Keys (2016) illustrate how preschool television series can both introduce children to the sociopolitical and cultural environments of their time as well as encourage children to change these environments in the future. For instance, Keys explains how preschool shows with positive portrayals of minorities and females leads, such as *Doc McStuffins* and *Dora the Explorer*, can inspire minority and female preschool viewers to aspire to become doctors, engineers, and scientists, thereby reducing the race and gender gaps in STEM education programs (p. 366). Of course, studies also show that how much preschoolers learn from media characters and model their own attitudes and behaviors after characters depends on the degree to which preschoolers trust and identify with characters (Flynn et al., 2016; Gusita et al., 2013). Furthermore, while research repeatedly supports that children learn from explicit and implicit messages from their visual media, the extent to which children absorb and process these messages depends on several factors, including

a child's age and developmental state and the quantity and quality of discussions children have with adults about media content (Aladé et al., 2014; Calvert & Wilson, 2011). Despite these potential mediating factors, scholars nonetheless agree that visual media play a critical and complex role in children's behavioral and cognitive development.

Parents and teachers also increasingly recognize the prominence and influence of visual media in children's lives. Consequently, they see the need to critically examine what their children watch in order to help children process messages on screen and become media literate themselves (Komaya, 2012). Around the world, media education is gaining more and more attention in school curriculums for students of all ages, and students, educators, and parents alike utilize media literacy guides developed by national and international organizations such as the *United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)* as media education tools (2019). The goals of such programs revolve around protection and participation, teaching people of all ages to recognize, understand, and evaluate messages in the media (Bulger & Davison, 2018). A handful of these programs have a faith-based component for use in religious institutions and private schools. However, according to Ianquinto and Keeler (2012) faith-based media literacy programs have been "unevenly implemented and unsupported by relevant research," including research on the portrayal and influence of religion in contemporary media (p. 27). Therefore, there is a need in both media literacy and religion and media studies for research on religion in children's visual media.

Religion in Christmas Films and Specials

Within existing religion and media studies literature, a literature again focused almost exclusively on adults, a handful of scholars have studied Christmas films in attempt to better understand the cultural meaning of Christmas in America across time. In these studies, scholars describe Christmas films as representing, as Belk (2013) writes, both the "secularization of the sacred" and the "sacralization of the secular" (p. 76). In terms of secularizing the sacred, scholars such as Agajanian (2001) argue that Christmas movies, especially those for family entertainment, exclude biblical references, instead replacing the Christian elements of the holiday with "secular substitutes" like a quasi-religious Santa in place of God or Jesus (p. 153). Likewise, Mundy (2008) concludes that Christmas movies exemplify our contemporary frame of mind and its competing secular ideologies of nostalgia for Victorian era family, goodwill, and peace and the modern pressures of capitalism, consumerism, and materialism. While Rosewarne (2017) illuminates many ways in which Christmas films are a "hodgepodge" of the sacred and the secular, with references to the Nativity story intermingled with contemporary capitalistic shopping rituals, she explains that filmmakers keep these religious nods subtle to make films more appealing to secular audiences for maximum profit in the box office (p. 397). Werts (2006) also argues that themes of commercialism and perfectionism are more pervasive than overt Christian messages and that characters are rewarded more often for believing in Santa than in Christ. Thus, as Horlsey and Tracy (2001) surmise, Christmas films show that Christmas in America is the "religion of consumer capitalism," and "Jesus is definitely not the reason for the season" (p. 2).

On the other hand, Deacy (2016) contends that Christmas commercialism and materialism are precisely what make contemporary Christmas a religious holiday. In particular, Deacy claims that themes of financial profit and greed in Christmas narratives are bound to themes compatible with traditional Christian teachings of love, community, and generosity.

Christmas as commercialized thus allows for the emergence of the real “profound” meaning of the season through the transformation of the secular into the sacred (p. 201). According to Deacy, we must “lay to rest the secularization thesis, with its simplistic assumption that religion in Western society is undergoing a period of escalating and irrevocable erosion, and to see instead that the secular may itself be a repository of the religious” (p. 11). Therefore, the ongoing scholarly debate on the portrayal of Christmas in films is part of a much greater academic dispute on the definition of secularization in today’s world.¹

While existing scholarship on Christmas movies provide many critical insights on Christmas on screen and in American culture, the accuracy and relevancy of these insights today are limited by the fact that the majority of these studies primarily focus on films from the 1940s to the 1990s (Connelly, 2001). Furthermore, while some classic family films such as *Home Alone* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* have been analyzed, countless contemporary children’s television specials have yet to be explored (Chapman, 2001). The following analysis therefore contributes to Christmas film literature with some much needed, updated research on the portrayal of Christmas and other religious traditions in children’s holiday specials.

Sources, Method, and Terminology

To address both the literature gap in religion and media studies and, most importantly, the need to identify messages visual media send to children on religion, this study investigates how three of the most-watched preschool television networks, *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids*, depict religion in their holiday specials aired in December of 2018.

Disney Junior is a branch of the global media giant, *The Walt Disney Company*. As of 2018, *The Walt Disney Company* ranked number 55 on the Fortune 500 list with a total revenue over 55 USD billion, making it one of the most lucrative entertainment companies in the world (“Fortune 500: Disney,” 2019a). *The Walt Disney Company*’s mission is “to entertain, inform and inspire people” through “unparalleled storytelling, reflecting iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies” (Disney, 2019). *Disney Junior* is the *Disney Company*’s preschool entertainment block aimed at children ages 2–5. In 2012, *Disney Junior*, formerly *Playhouse Disney*, received its own 24-hour cable channel in order to expand its “unique, fun, and educational programming,” thus helping *Disney* compete for preschool viewers against its top competitor, *Nick Jr.* (Berman, 2011).

Nick Jr. is a branch of the parent company *Viacom*. *Viacom* may rank much lower than *Disney* in the 2018 Fortune 500 list as number 224 (“Fortune 500: Viacom,” 2019b), but it has held the spot as one of the most popular preschool television networks since the creation of *Nick Jr.* (formerly *Noggin*) in 1999 (Petrozzello, 1999). *Noggin*’s original aim was to attract preschool viewers with largely educational-based shows on an ad-free cable channel (Larson, 2004). *Nick Jr.* is no longer ad-free, but it still acts to fulfill *Viacom*’s mission to serve as the world’s leading entertainment brand (Viacom, 2019). Nevertheless, in terms of revenue, *Viacom* falls far behind *Disney* with a total of 13 USD billion.

In contrast to *Disney Junior* and *Nick Jr.*, *PBS Kids*, as part of the *Public Broadcasting Station* (founded in 1972), is a nonprofit corporation (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2010). Today, according to a 2015 report by the Nielsen Company, over 82% of U.S. households have

¹See, for example, Christiano and Swatos (1999).

television access to *PBS Kids*, thereby making *PBS Kids* available to more children from low-income families than any other television network in the country (PBS, 2017). Additionally, Nielsen found that over two-thirds of children ages 2–8 watch *PBS Kids*. *PBS Kids*' mission is to serve as "America's largest classroom" and "trusted window to the world" by teaching children fundamental educational concepts as well as by exposing children to diverse cultural practices (PBS, 2016). In pursuit of its educational mission, *PBS Kids* annually airs "high-quality, educational holiday programming that the whole family can enjoy" (PBS, 2014).

Overall, with their widespread viewership, *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids*' holiday specials are opportune starting points for studying the ways in which children's visual media portray religion. The holiday specials pulled from these networks for this analysis were all advertised by their networks in press releases, print ads, online ads, and televised commercials as extraordinary seasonal entertainment. "Holiday specials" include regular-length episodes in a series as well as series-inspired movies. (For a complete list of specials analyzed, see [Appendix A](#).)

In analyzing preschool holiday specials televised in 2018, this study utilizes qualitative content analysis (QCA). QCA, also known as qualitative media analysis, qualitative data analysis, and qualitative document analysis, is, as Schreier (2012) explains, a "method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material . . . by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame" (p. 13). This classifying, categorizing, and coding process suits several types of studies and has become a popular methodology amongst scholars in various fields including education, history, and communication studies (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Of course, there are many suitable methods aside from QCA for identifying, enumerating, and analyzing messages embedded in televised media. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this interdisciplinary study, QCA was chosen for being a well-established methodology across academic fields— one that is capable of breaking down and studying messages at great breadth and depth by analyzing and comparing physical units, meaning units, syntactical units, referential units, and thematic units. Therefore, QCA offers a solid, systematic approach for religion and media studies scholars to begin to analyze religion in children's visual media.

For this QCA, a protocol was first drafted to record how the specials portrayed religion through illustrations of holiday activities and observances; lessons on the religious significances and origins of holidays; and uses of holiday images and music. Additionally, the protocol was used to systematically collect information on the gender and race of main characters, special length in minutes, original release date, and production company(s) and production location(s). (See [Appendix B](#) for the protocol template.) This protocol was tested on 8 specials and then revised slightly in order to best record data on religion in children's holiday specials. After the data for all 44 specials were recorded, the data were categorized by network as well as holiday and then coded for keywords and concepts. Finally, the data were analyzed for extremes, patterns within categories, and correlations between categorical findings. The following sections describe the strongest, most salient findings on the portrayal of religion in preschool holiday specials televised in 2018 as well as identify some important questions these findings raise in regards to the diversity of religious portrayals in preschool television, preschoolers' learning about religion from television, and media literacy on religion in children's television.

The findings and implications sections use the terms "generalized," "commercialized," and "religious" in discussing the portrayal of religion in children's holiday specials. Generalized

depictions of winter holiday celebrations refer to anything seasonally-related without specific affiliations with particular holidays or religions. For example, holiday generalizations include common winter activities such as making snowmen as well as basic winter imagery such as snowflakes. Holiday commercialism encompasses business-driven activities and images, especially those associated with the “hustle and bustle” of the shopping season and with secular, material-based holiday preparations. Additionally, commercialism conveys the pressure to achieve perfection by maximizing pleasure from presents and preparations. Finally, the religious category includes all holiday activities, lessons, and symbols directly connected to traditional observances and meanings of a particular religion and its celebrations.

Holiday portrayals fit within the generalized, commercialized, and sacred categories in various degrees depending on the presence of contextual allusions to religious traditions. For example, a Christmas tree adorned with an angel fits the religious classification if it appears in a church, a town nativity scene, or a family’s home where people discuss Jesus’ birth. However, a tree with an angel or star topper best suits the generalized classification if nothing in the context distinguishes the angel or star from ubiquitous decorations.

The terms general, commercial, and religious are, of course, ambiguous and complex and thus subject to interpretation depending on the academic, cultural, and religious contexts in which they are used. In particular, scholars heavily debate what is secular vs. religious in our contemporary, capitalist society.² However, while such terminological debates are certainly relevant to the study of the portrayal of religion in children’s visual media, my intent is not to argue the absolute meaning of secular and religious but rather to identify key vocabulary used in this study and in the conversations this study hopefully inspires.

Findings on Portrayals of Religion in Preschool Holiday Specials

Overall, this QCA of December 2018 holiday specials from *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids* found that preschool television holiday specials are experiencing a shift away from religious diversity and depth toward a more commercialized, generalized, and secularized portrayal of the holidays in which images of Santa and presents and simple prosocial lessons obscure the traditional religious meanings of the holidays. In particular, while holiday specials featuring Chanukah and other non-Christmas religious winter holidays are, on average, older, longer, and fewer in number than Christmas specials, non-Christmas holidays are portrayed in much greater depth than Christmas with greater attention to the religious aspects and significance of their respective traditions. In contrast, while Christmas specials are shorter, more recent, and more numerous on average compared to other preschool TV holiday specials, the religious aspects and significance of Christmas are rarely illustrated but instead obscured by commercialized and generalized illustrations of holiday activities, lessons, and symbols. These assessments are true across networks. Although correlations between how the holidays are portrayed and the gender and race of characters were also analyzed, no significant patterns emerged.

The Portrayal of Non-Christmas Religious Holidays: Storytelling and Tradition

Overall, 8 of the 44 specials (18%) studied in this QCA portrayed a religious winter holiday other than Christmas as either the main holiday of focus or as one of several holidays

²For a comprehensive summary of this debate, see Davie (2013).

depicted. On average, these specials first aired in 2009 and are 28 minutes long, and most (5 of 8) were produced by *PBS Kids*. All 8 of these specials featured Chanukah to some extent, 5 featured Kwanzaa, and 1 featured Ramadan. In doing so, 7 of the 8 specials (87.5%) illustrated some of the traditional religious significance and meaning of non-Christmas holidays through holiday activities, lessons, and symbols. Two main themes emerged in these religious portrayals: storytelling and traditions.

The majority of non-Christmas religious holiday specials use storytelling to highlight religious traditions and emphasize the religious history, meaning, and/or significance behind the holidays. Often in Chanukah specials, characters verbally and visually explain why people celebrate with specific traditions. For example, in *Puppy Dog Pals'* episode "The Latke Kerfuffle" from *Disney Junior*, friends at a Chanukah party converse about the Chanukah miracle and tell the story of how their "ancestors thought they only had enough oil for one day, but it lasted for eight!" (Carleton & Wall, 2017). One party-goer then directly connects modern Chanukah traditions with sacred Chanukah history by explaining that "We light the Chanukiah to remember how our ancestors worked together and stood up for what they believed in, even though it was hard. And lighting the candles reminds us to stand up for what's right too" (Carleton & Wall, 2017). Likewise, in *Super Why's* episode "Judith's Happy Chanukah" from *PBS Kids*, the Super Readers (four fairytale friends who use their super reading powers to answer questions and solve problems) learn that people celebrate Chanukah with "special traditions" (Santomero & Johnson, 2015). Their Jewish friend Judith uses a storybook to tell them the ancient Chanukah miracle story, and the Super Readers reference this story later when lighting the menorah and making latkes. Consistently then, Chanukah specials from this analysis used storytelling to illustrate Chanukah's religious roots.

Similarly, specials featuring religious holidays other than Christmas and Chanukah also incorporated the themes of storytelling and spiritual traditions. Specifically, in holiday specials featuring Kwanzaa, Kwanzaa's origin and sacred Kwanzaa symbols are often portrayed. For instance, in the *Arthur* movie "Arthur's Perfect Christmas" from *PBS Kids*, Arthur's friend the Brain explains that Kwanzaa "was invented for African Americans by Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966" and that Kwanzaa's colors of green, black, and red represent freedom, unity, and the African struggle for freedom respectively (Hirsch & Bailey, 2000). However, unlike with Chanukah specials, the storytelling theme in other non-Christmas religious holiday specials is sometimes absent. In the *Blue's Clues'* episode "Blue's First Holiday" from *Nick Jr.* for example, Blue and Joe receive a video postcard from a real boy celebrating Ramadan (Peltzman & Chanda, 2003). While the boy talks about the concept of fasting and how he fasts sun up to sun down, he does not explain why he fasts or why fasting is an important tradition, and he does not specify Islam as his religion. Another exception to the religiously-connected storytelling is *Sid the Science Kids'* episode "Sid's Holiday Adventure" from *PBS Kids*, because Sid, who celebrates Christmas, Chanukah, and Kwanzaa, only briefly mentions how his family lights candles on the menorah and the kinara without describing why (Powell et al., 2009). Nonetheless, overall, non-Christmas religious holiday specials emphasize the religious significance and meaning behind holiday traditions using storytelling.

It is important to note that non-Christmas holiday specials also occasionally incorporate other themes discussed in this article such as generalized and commercialized portrayals of holiday activities, lessons, and symbols. However, such themes were most often connected

not with the celebration of Chanukah, Kwanzaa, or Ramadan but with the portrayal of Christmas within those same specials.

The Portrayal of Christmas: Generalization and Commercialism

Of the 44 specials analyzed in this study, 37 specials (84%) featured Christmas as either the main holiday of focus or as one of several holidays depicted. The Christmas specials were, on average, newer and shorter than the non-Christmas religious specials, with an average initial release date of 2012 and an average length of 25 minutes. In these Christmas specials, the religious aspects and significance of Christmas are rarely illustrated but instead obscured by commercialized and generalized illustrations of Christmas activities, lessons, and symbols. Within these themes, common motifs of achieving materialistic perfection, the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, and helping Santa, emerge as antitheses to general lessons about the importance of family, friends, and kindness.

The activities and imagery in most Christmas specials revolve around presents and decorations. Shopping, exchanging gifts, and writing Christmas wish lists are three of the most common activities in which Christmas special characters engage, and images of presents and toy stores appear frequently. Christmas special characters are also often preoccupied with putting up festive décor such as candy canes, lights, and Christmas trees adorned with simple yellow stars and colorful ball ornaments with rarely any angels or other Christian symbols. As characters prepare for Christmas with shopping and decorations, they often find themselves under the pressures of time and perfection, rushing to make everything just right for the holidays, panicking over finding the perfect present or Christmas tree, and fretting that Christmas will be ruined if they cannot achieve commercial perfection. For example, the *Curious George* movie “A Very Monkey Christmas” from *PBS Kids* uses the word “perfect” 13 times to describe decorations, gifts, and trees as George and the Man in the Yellow Hat race anxiously against the clock, attempting to make Christmas perfect for one another by finding a “prize-winning” Christmas tree and buying presents at the tops of each other’s wish lists (Fallon et al., 2009).

In addition to perfectionism and holiday hustle and bustle, Christmas special characters also participate in Christmas commercialism by helping Santa. Nearly one third of all Christmas specials in this study involved characters assisting Santa with making and distributing presents, and Santa-helping characters, such as Rusty in *Rusty Rivets*’ episode “Rusty Saves Christmas” from *Nick Jr.*, believe that, without Santa and presents, there can be no Christmas (Hunziker & Marshall, 2018). One *PBS Kids* special, *Let’s Go Luna!*’s movie “Christmas Around the World,” is even entirely devoted to illustrating different versions of Santa and Santa-like figures in various international cultures such as Père Noël and Tío de Nadal, and the *Let’s Go Luna!* characters become distraught as they worry that their favorite gift-givers may not visit them this year (Hannan et al., 2018). However, the characters in *Let’s Go Luna!* and those in most other Santa-focused Christmas specials eventually learn that it is really family and friends who make Christmas special, not Santa or presents, and that the true “Christmas spirit” comes from showing love, generosity, and kindness to others. Luna and her friends, for example, eventually realize that “The important thing about Christmas ... is showing your family and friends that you love them” by giving to others (Hannan et al., 2018). Thus, overall, the Christmas specials in this study came wrapped in a package of commercial themes, with a bow of general prosocial lessons tied on top.

There are two small yet noteworthy religious exceptions to the generalized and commercialized portrayals of Christmas found in two of the oldest specials in this study. The first is “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.” In this special, Arthur and his family attend church on Christmas Eve, and they converse about ancient Jerusalem around the dinner table. Later, the Read family even has a supper of “real authentic Christmas food: the kind they might have actually had in Bethlehem when Jesus was born,” and Arthur imagines his family as characters in a Bethlehem-like setting, sitting on a hay-covered floor, eating from wooden bowls, and wearing robes (Hirsch & Bailey, 2000). Similarly, Jesus’ birth is also highlighted in *Blue’s Clues*’ “Blue’s Big Holiday” when Blue’s friend Wynonna explains how “Christmas is a time when we get together, and we celebrate a very special birth” (Bailey et al., 1999). Although these Christian references are unique and thus significant contrasts to the other Christmas specials, the majority of content in these *Arthur* and *Blue’s Clues* specials still revolves around gifts, secular decorations, and general winter activities. Therefore, the Christmas specials in this study heavily portray Christmas generalization and commercialism.

The Portrayal of Non-Specified Holidays: Shadows of Christmas Generalization and Commercialism

In this QCA, 3 of the 44 specials (7%) portrayed non-specified winter holidays. These specials were, on average, newer and shorter than Christmas and other specified religious holiday specials, with an average release date of 2015 and an average length of 20 minutes. Given the small sample size, it is impossible to make any concrete conclusions about the ways in which these specials portray religion, but they nevertheless provide interesting insights for greater study. On the surface, these specials appear holiday “neutral” with no formal mention of specific traditions and with portrayals of general winter and celebratory activities. However, all activities, lessons, and symbols in these specials largely reflect the commercialized and generalized version of Christmas illustrated in Christmas holiday specials. For example, in *Mickey and the Roadster Racers*’ episode “Happy Hot Diggity Dog Holiday!” from *Disney Junior*, Mickey and his friends compete in the “Ornament Holiday Palooza” race in order to win a star tree topper (Seidenberg & Weinstein, 2017). During the episode, images of Christmas trees, presents, and Santa appear frequently, but the word “Christmas” is never used. Similarly, in the *Butterbean’s Café* episode “The Sugar Plum Fairy” from *Nick Jr.*, Butterbean and her friends celebrate the holidays by giving gifts, decorating a tree, and having a big turkey dinner, and they repeatedly remark that “the holidays are better when we spend them together,” a lesson that perfectly exemplifies the general prosocial lessons found in preschool Christmas specials (Belt et al., 2018). Thus, while non-specified holiday specials may seem holiday “neutral,” they are better categorized as non-specified Christmas specials.

Discussion and Implications

By addressing the important yet largely unexplored topic of religion in children’s visual media, this study makes several significant contributions to religion and media studies. This analysis of holiday specials from the three top preschool television networks in the U.S. demonstrates, first and foremost, that portrayals of religion are prevalent in children’s

television, and, in preschool holiday specials, those portrayals are shifting away from religious diversity and depth toward a more secularized, generalized, and commercialized portrayal of the holidays in which images of Santa and presents and simple prosocial lessons obscure the traditional religious meanings of the holidays. These patterns and trends over time not only illustrate the need for greater attention from religion and media studies scholars to children's visual media, but they also raise questions for scholars and various other stakeholders, including parents, religious leaders, and media producers. In the following sub-sections, I turn to examples of such questions and the import of addressing them.

Decreased Diversity in Religious Portrayals in Preschool Television

This study shows that preschool television is experiencing a decrease in the diversity and depth of portrayals of traditional religion in preschool holiday specials. While older specials in this QCA (from as early as 1999) were, on average, longer and more likely to illustrate more than one religious holiday and the religious significance of the holidays, newer holiday specials were more likely to portray a commercialized and generalized depiction of Christmas or non-specified winter holiday without illustrating any traditional religious aspects of the holidays. One of the greatest questions this data raises for religion and media studies scholars is why there appears to be a shift away from traditional religion in children's television. To what extent do portrayals of religion in preschool television reflect the attitudes, practices, and understandings of religious winter holidays in American culture? On one hand, perhaps preschool holiday specials' illustrations of Christmas commercial activities and symbols mirror the boom of US retail business during the holiday season, the nationwide proliferation of images of Santa and presents in winter store displays and advertisements, and the symbol of the Christmas tree standing as the ultimate "metonym for the season" (Rosewarne, 2017, p. 151). If so, this could, as some scholars argue, represent an increasingly secularized America in which fewer and fewer Americans identify as religious and religion loses prevalence in society (Pew Research Center, 2017b).

On the other hand, this trend more fully supports Deacy's (2016) theory that contemporary Christmas is a site of implicit religion, and "it is [Christmas'] very secularity that makes Christmas such a compelling, and even transcendent, religious holiday" (p. 11). After all, most Christmas specials from this study utilize commercial-based plots to teach lessons about loving others and giving to those less fortunate, two major Christian morals. Of course, these morals are not unique to Christianity but prominent in several other faiths and religious celebrations. Indeed, the same prosocial lessons about generosity and togetherness taught in children's Christmas specials also appeared in the Chanukah, Kwanzaa, and non-specified holidays specials in this study. Curiously then, at a time of increasing religious diversity, children's television is trending away from more specified religious understanding toward an amorphous holiday with broad prosocial lessons everyone can get behind, and Christmas wins the title for this ubiquitous holiday at the price of becoming more generic. In this way, Christmas may serve as a site of implicit religion, but, given the paucity of traditional Christian doctrine and worship practices in televised depictions, it is unclear for which tradition – Christian, capitalist, or other – Christmas in preschool television serves as an implicit religious site.

In order to address these hypotheses and questions, researchers must expand their knowledge of the downward trend in religious diversity and depth in children's television

by analyzing portrayals of religion in children's holiday specials from additional networks and earlier specials targeting a range of age groups.

Preschool Learning about Religion from Television

Just as it is important to question what we can learn about religion in America from portrayals of religion in preschool holiday specials, it is crucial to examine what children learn from televised portrayals of religion. After all, media both reflect and shape our attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and culture (Hodkinson, 2010). The results from this QCA in particular raise questions about what preschool audiences learn about Christianity, Judaism, and other religious traditions from current holiday specials. For example, television's commercialized representations of Christmas suggest that Christmas has more commercial than religious significance. What children glean from that representation and how those gleanings will affect their perceptions about religion as they develop merits further study. It seems possible that television could give children an impression leading to a negative view of Christianity as a shallow religion, too corrupted by capitalism and too distant from tradition to still hold spiritual truth in today's world. On the other hand, this impression may lead to a positive assessment of Christianity precisely because it is compatible with the capitalistic system our country revolves around. Likewise, if holiday specials consistently illustrate non-Christmas winter holidays such as Chanukah less often but with greater attention to the sacred aspects of those celebrations, preschool holiday specials may seem to suggest to children that other holidays hold more religious import than Christmas, thereby implying that Judaism and other non-Christian religions as more authentic and wholesome than Christianity. Alternatively, considering that 92% of the American population celebrates Christmas, it could also be fair to assume that children may grow to understand the sacred aspects of Christmas so that the more in-depth portrayals of non-Christmas holidays boost the average child's religious knowledge of other holidays and equalize children's understandings of winter religious celebrations (Pew Research Center, 2017a). All of the above suppositions are examples of hypotheses that emerge from this QCA of preschool holiday specials, and they require future studies to test.

In studying what children learn about religion from TV holiday specials, scholars should pay close attention to both implicit and explicit messages and the tensions between them, especially in Christmas specials. This QCA, for example, revealed that themes of Christmas commercialism often arose in tension with general prosocial lessons about the importance of family, friends, and kindness. While the ultimate lessons in these Christmas specials critiqued commercialistic greed and perfection and emphasized that Christmas is really about being with loved ones and expressing generosity, the vast majority of these specials were dominated by images of gifts and Santa and by characters striving to make Christmas perfect through presents, decorations, and other manifestations of materialism. Therefore, future studies on the portrayal of religion in children's holiday specials must examine the extent to which children learn explicit prosocial messages versus the extent to which children absorb implicit commercialistic messages. Such conclusions can then help researchers understand what televised ideas inform children's fundamental beliefs about religion and the ways in which those beliefs influence children's lifelong spiritual behaviors and attitudes toward religion.

Media Literacy on Religion in Children's Television

As scholars develop a greater understanding of the messages children's television sends about religion and the ways children learn about religion from television, scholars should work together with key stakeholders, including parents, media producers, and religious leaders, to address questions of media literacy. For example, as media consumption and regulation continue as hot topics of dialogue and debate among parents, parents may ask how they can best help their children navigate religious messages on screen. Likewise, religious leaders and educators such as rabbis and Sunday School teachers, in their mission to help parents raise children spiritually, may ask how they can create media education courses and materials for parents on religion in children's visual media. In order to do so, religious educators must first critically evaluate how their tradition is presented to children on screen and decide how their institution as a whole should respond. For instance, if educators feel that current portrayals of religion in preschool television insufficiently illustrate the religious significance of their holiday, educators may design lesson plans for teachers and media literacy guides for parents that focus on how adults can help preschoolers understand the sacred roots and import of their holiday, thereby countering and/or supplementing the deficient religious messages preschoolers receive from holiday specials.

Finally, parents, religious educators, and religion and media studies scholars may also engage in dialogue with media producers and ask how producers may portray religion in children's programming in ways that remain authentic to diverse religious traditions and best meet children's developmental and educational needs. For television networks, this may involve reexamining company mission statements and determining if the ways in which their series portray religion aligns with their company goals and values. For instance, this QCA reveals that *PBS Kids* produced more holiday specials featuring non-Christmas religious holidays than any other television network, which aligns with *PBS Kids*' mission to educate children on cultural diversity, but *PBS Kids* still produced more Christmas programs than any other religious holiday program. Moreover, *PBS Kids*' Christmas specials neglected to illustrate the traditional Christian significance of Christmas, instead sticking primarily to portrayals of holiday generalizations and commercialism. This suggests that *PBS Kids* is leaning away from cultural education toward non-alienating secularization, thereby sending mixed messages about the significance and meanings of religious holidays. Consequently, *PBS Kids* may reconsider how well its current holiday specials provide preschoolers a "trusted window to the world," specifically a window into some of the world's most popular religious celebrations (PBS, 2016).

Overall, answering the many questions and concerns this QCA raises about the portrayal of religion in children's visual media will involve a variety of parties engaged in discussions on media literacy, and the contribution of further research by religion and media studies scholars is the fuel necessary to power these critical conversations.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This QCA of 2018 preschool holiday specials from *Disney Junior*, *Nick Jr.*, and *PBS Kids* reveals that holiday specials are experiencing a shift away from religious diversity and depth toward a more secularized, generalized, and commercialized portrayal of the holidays with greater emphasis on prosocial lessons over the religious significance of

the holidays. While holiday specials featuring Chanukah and other non-Christmas religious winter holidays are, on average, older and less common than Christmas specials, non-Christmas holidays are portrayed in much greater depth than Christmas with greater attention to the religious aspects and significance of their respective traditions. Furthermore, preschool television is trending away from the formal recognition of religious holidays toward non-specified holidays with pseudo-Christmas commercialism and generalized activities, lessons, and symbols. Overall, the findings from this study have the potential to generate several important conversations amongst a variety of stakeholders, from scholars to parents to media producers; conversations that can help all better understand religion in American society, the power of television to influence children's understandings of and attitudes toward religion, and the ability of parents, media producers, and religious educators to control that influence.

However, before any party can seize these powerful opportunities, religion and media studies scholars must first build on this current study by conducting additional analyses of religion in children's visual media. This study is, after all, limited in so far as it only includes analyses by one researcher on a sample of 44 specials from three networks in one year to one target age group. Thus, in order to better understand the pervasiveness, portrayal, and power of religion in children's visual media, religion and media studies scholars must analyze children's television series from a greater number and variety of networks, dates, and genres. In doing so, researchers should also look beyond traditional television to online media platforms and streaming services such as *YouTube* and *Netflix* where more and more children go to watch their favorite shows (Davis & Loprinzi, 2016). Nonetheless, no matter where in the world of children's visual media researchers look next, this study illustrates that children's programs are a rich source base, filled with insights on the complexities of the media-religion interface and clues on this interface's influence on children, who make up one fourth of the global population (Population Reference Bureau, 2017). Therefore, with thousands of hours of children's television shows and films left to analyze, this study is just the beginning of a wealth of new opportunities and discoveries in religion and media studies.

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Appendix A: Holiday specials analyzed*

*Organized by network and original release date

Disney Junior

Marsden, P. (Producer) & O'Callaghan, M. (Director). (2004). *Mickey's twice upon a Christmas* [Motion picture]. USA: DisneyToon Studios.

Gannaway, B. (Writer) & Laduca, R. (Director). (2006). Mickey saves Santa [Television series episode]. In B. Gannaway (Executive producer), *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*. Glendale, CA: Disney Television Animation.

Nee, C. (Writer & Director). (2013). A very McStuffins Christmas [Television series episode]. In C. Nee (Executive producer), *Doc McStuffins*. Toronto, CA: Brown Bag Films.

Carleton, J. (Writer) & Wall, T. (Director). (2017). The latke kerfuffle [Television series episode]. In S. Coyle (Executive producer), *Puppy Dog Pals*. Telangana, IND: DQ Entertainment.

Dondis, R. (Writer) & Bern, S. (Director). (2017). A very pug Christmas [Television series episode]. In S. Coyle (Executive producer), *Puppy Dog Pals*. Telangana, IND: DQ Entertainment.

Duran, K. (Writer) & Likomanov, B. (Director). (2017). Happy holiday helpers! [Television series episode]. In R. LaDuca (Executive producer), *Mickey and the Roadster Racers*. Glendale, CA: Disney Television Animation.

Seidenberg, M. (Writer) & Weinstein, P. (Director). (2017). Happy hot diggity dog holiday! [Television series episode]. In R. LaDuca (Executive producer), *Mickey and the roadster racers*. Glendale, CA: Disney Television Animation.

Guerdat, A. (Writer) & Manta, M. K. & Mitchell, J. (Directors). (2018). Nancy and the nice list [Television series episode]. In J. Mitchell & K. Tucker (Executive producers), *Fancy Nancy*. Glendale, CA: Disney Television Animation.

King, J. (Writer) & Phelan, N. (Director). (2018). Nanpire and Grandpop the Greats [Television series episode]. In C. Nee (Executive producer), *Vampirina*. Dublin, IRL: Brown Bag Films.

López, V.M. (Writer) & Moro, F. (Director). (2018). Christmas day. In F. De Fuentes, J. C. D. De Letona, C. Moro, & C. Reyes. (Executive producers), *Cleo and Cuquin*. Mexico City, MX: Televisa.

Nee, C. (Writer) & Virgien, N. (Director). (2018). The Doc McStuffins Christmas special [Television series episode]. In C. Nee (Executive producer), *Doc McStuffins*. Toronto, CA: Brown Bag Films.

Nick Jr.

Bailey, J. A., Santomero, A., Smith, M., & Wilder, A. (Writers) & Chanda, K. (Director). (1999). Blue's big holiday [Television series episode]. In T.P. Johnson, T. Kessler, & A. Santomero (Executive producers), *Blue's clues*. Burbank, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studios.

Gifford, C. (Writer) & Chialtas, G.S. (Director). (2002). A present for Santa [Television series episode]. In C. Gifford (Executive producer), *Dora the Explorer*. Los Angeles, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studio.

Peltzman, A. (Writer) & Chanda, K. (Director). (2003). Blue's first holiday [Television series episode]. In T.P. Johnson, T. Kessler, & A. Santomero (Executive producers), *Blue's clues*. Burbank, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studios.

Astley, N. & Baker, M. (Writers & Directors). (2007). Peppa's Christmas [Television series episode]. In J. Lofts (Executive producer), *Peppa Pig*. London, UK: Astley Baker Davies.

Gifford, C. (Writer) & Chialtas, G.S., Jacobsen, A., & Lenardin-Madden, H. (Directors). (2009). Dora's Christmas carol adventure [Television series movie]. In C. Gifford (Executive producer), *Dora the Explorer*. Los Angeles, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studio.

Astley, N. & Baker, M. (Writers & Directors). (2010). Santa's visit [Television series episode]. In O. Dumont (Executive producer), *Peppa Pig*. London, UK: Astley Baker Davies.

Astley, N., Baker, M., & Hall, P. (Writers & Directors). (2010). Santa's grotto [Television series episode]. In O. Dumont (Executive producer), *Peppa Pig*. London, UK: Astley Baker Davies.

Strader, K.P. & Twomey, J. (Writers) & Conner, S. (Director). (2010). Santa's little fixers [Television series episode]. In J. Twomey (Executive producer), *Team Umizoomi*. New York, NY: Curious Pictures.

Astley, N., Baker, M., Hall, P., & Morrison, S. (Writers) & Hall, P. & Van Hulzen, J. (Directors). (2011). Mr. Potato's Christmas show [Television series episode]. In L. Clunie (Executive producer), *Peppa Pig*. London, UK: Astley Baker Davies.

Peltzman, A. (Writer) & Astolfo, J. & Salisbury, M. (Directors). (2011). Happy holidays Mr. Grumpfish [Television series episode]. In J. Belt & R. Scull (Executive producers), *Bubble guppies*. Burbank, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studios.

Ziegler-Sullivan, U. (Writer) & Whitney, J. (Director). (2013). Pups save Christmas [Television series episode]. In J. Dodge (Executive producer), *Paw Patrol*. Toronto, CA: Guru Studio.

Peltzman, A. (Writer) & Astolfo, J. & Salisbury, M. (Directors). (2014). A very guppy Christmas [Television series episode]. In J. Belt & R. Scull (Executive producers), *Bubble guppies*. Burbank, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studios.

Borkin, J. (Writer) & Joice, J. & Martinez-Joffre, M. (Directors). (2015). Monster machine Christmas [Television series episode]. In J. Borkin & E. Martin (Executive producers), *Blaze and the monster machines*. Burbank, CA: Nickelodeon Animation Studios.

Astley, N., Baker, M., & Hall, P. (Writers) & Astley, N., Baker, M., Roper, S., & Van Hulzen, J. (2017). Father Christmas [Television series episode]. In O. Dumont (Executive producer), *Peppa Pig*. London, UK: Astley Baker Davies.

Hohlfeld, B. (Writer) & Seles, S., So, J., & Thomas, D.B. (Directors). (2017). Best Christmas ever [Television series movie]. In P. Rosenthal (Executive producer), *Sunny Day*. London, UK: Silvergate Media.

Nolan, J. (Writer) & Dolev, G. (Director). (2017). The knight before Christmas [Television series episode]. In C. Garrney, G. Higgins, & D. O'Connell (Executive producers), *Nella the Princess Knight*. Dublin, IRL: Brown Bag Films.

Bain, T. (Writer) & Basso, D. (Director). (2018). Kangaroo Christmas [Television series episode]. In K. Dougall, P. LaFrance, & J. Leclaire (Executive producers), *Thomas and Friends*. London, UK: HIT Entertainment.

Belt, J., Morrow, C., & Scull, R. (Writers) & Keane, R. & O'Connor, D. (Directors). (2018). The sugar plum fairy [Television series episode]. In C. Gaffney & G. O'Connell (Executive producers), *Butterbean's café*. Dublin, IRL: Brown Bag Films.

Hunziker, P. (Writer) & Marshall, R. (Director). (2018). Rusty saves Christmas [Television series episode]. In T. Stevens (Executive producer), *Rusty Rivets*. Toronto, CA: Jam Filled.

Langan, S., Stephenson, A., & Strader, P.K. (Writers) & Canales, R.D. & Mooney, N. (Directors). (2018). Merry Woodsmas [Television series episode]. In J. Rice & A. Shannon (Executive producers), *Becca's bunch*. Belfast, UK: Jam Media.

White, M. (Writer) & Basso, D. (Director). (2018). Hunt the car [Television series episode]. In T. Blagdon & M. Winter (Executive producers), *Thomas and Friends*. London, UK: HIT Entertainment.

PBS Kids

Hirsch, P.K. (Writer) & Bailey, G. (Director). (2000). Arthur's perfect Christmas [Television series movie]. In M. Brown, C. Greenwald, & P. Moss (Executive producers), *Arthur*. Toronto, CA: 9 Story Media.

Santomero, A.C. (Writer) & Johnson, T.P. (Director). (2008). 'Twas the night before Christmas [Television series episode]. In W. Harris & S. Wallendjack (Executive producer), *Super why!*. Philadelphia, PA: Out of the Blue Productions.

Fallon, J. (Writer) & Heming, S., Malkasian, C., & McGarth, J. (Director). (2009). A very monkey Christmas [Television series movie]. In B. Grazer & D. Kirschner (Executive producer), *Curious George*. Beverly Hills, CA: Imagine Entertainment.

Powell, C. (Writer) & Calamandrei, C. & Gumpel, D. (Directors). (2009). Sid's holiday adventure [Television series episode]. In B. Henson, L. Henson, H. Stanford, & B. Zweig (Executive producers), *Sid the science kid*. Los Angeles, CA: The Jim Henson Company.

Graham, R., Holloway, M., & Moonah, K. (Writers) & Collingwood, T. & Neilson, S. (Directors). (2012). The Cat in the Hat knows a lot about Christmas [Television series episode]. In T. Collingwood, L. Olfman, & J. Rosen (Executive producers), *The Cat in the Hat knows a lot about that*. Toronto, CA: Portfolio Entertainment.

Lopez, B. (Writer) & Bobiak, C. (Director). (2014). The Christmas problem [Television series episode]. In B. Aronson, V. Commisso, K. Morrison, & J. Oxley (Executive producers), *Peg + Cat*. Pittsburgh, PA: The Fred Rogers Company.

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Appendix B: Protocol template

- (1) Title
- (2) Series
 - (a) Target audience ages
 - (b) General learning outcomes (if applicable)
- (3) Length
- (4) Network
- (5) Production company(s)
 - (a) Name
 - (b) Primary location
- (6) Initial release date (US)
- (7) Characters
 - (a) Race/ethnicity of main characters (if applicable)
 - (b) Gender of main characters
- (8) Holiday(s) represented
- (9) Plot synopsis
- (10) Holiday observances/activities illustrated
- (11) Lessons
 - (a) Overall message
 - (b) Religious significance/origins (if any)
- (12) Holiday symbols
 - (a) Images
 - (b) Music
- (13) Miscellaneous notes.
- (14) Data summary.