Religion in Children’s Visual Media:
A Qualitative Media Analysis of *PBS Kids*’ Holiday Specials

By Megan Eide

A thesis submitted to the Department of Religion
Gustavus Adolphus College
December 13th, 2017

On my honor, I pledge that I have not given, received, or tolerated others’ use of unauthorized aid in completing this work
Abstract

Religion and media studies is a groundbreaking interdisciplinary field of research on the powerful interrelationships between religion and various media. While a large body of the field’s current scholarship focuses on religion in adult visual media, religion in children’s visual media remains unexplored. This study seeks to address this gap in literature by analyzing depictions of religion in selected holiday specials by PBS Kids. Using qualitative media analysis, this study reveals that PBS Kids depicts Christmas most often, but PBS Kids obscures the religious aspects of Christmas with commercialized and generalized illustrations of holiday activities, lessons, and symbols. Conversely, PBS Kids occasionally features other religious holidays such as Chanukah, Kwanzaa, and Saint Lucia Day, but it explores the sacred aspects of these celebrations in much greater depth than Christmas. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that religious messages are prevalent in children’s visual media, and they raise important questions for scholars regarding the patterns of religious portrayals in children’s programming and the explanatory variables behind these patterns. Furthermore, these findings have the powerful potential to prompt scholars, producers of children’s visual media, and those responsible for children’s spiritual lives to think critically about the ways in which televised religious messages influence children’s understandings of and attitudes towards religion. However, before any party may address these concerns, religion and media studies scholars must first build on this study and expand their knowledge of religion in children’s visual media by conducting further analyses of children’s programming across a variety of networks and genres.
Religion and media studies is a groundbreaking interdisciplinary field of research on the powerful interrelationships between religion and various media. In particular, religion and media studies scholars aim to explore how various types of visual media depict traditions and convictions of world religions.¹ In doing so, scholars recognize how religious messages proliferate across screens encountered in daily life, from televisions to theaters to computers. Consequently, they assert that portrayals of religion in visual media significantly shape people’s understandings of and attitudes towards religion.² Therefore, the discoveries made by religion and media studies scholars lay the foundation for building societal awareness and critical thinking about the significant ways the media shapes public and religious culture.

Currently, religion and media studies scholarship focuses heavily on representations of religion in adult visual media. These studies include analyses on depictions of religion in a variety of films and television shows, patterns in these depictions, and changes in patterns over time. Scholars also raise inquiries for additional research on the explanatory factors behind their findings. Additionally, some scholars go on to explore the implications of their findings in attempt to understand how the media’s portrayals of religion influence viewers’ spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and practices.³ By investigating these and similar inquiries through additional multidisciplinary studies, scholars have come to deepen 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 the portrayal of religion in children’s visual media. Consequently, scholars overlook a wealth of primary sources including thousands of hours of television and film productions aimed at audiences ages 12 and under. Scholars’ seemingly lack of interest in children’s visual media is both curious and alarming considering how the media strongly influences children’s behavioral, cognitive, and moral development. As Bandura attests 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. In doing so, children adopt several lifelong behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs illustrated on screen. Thus, by failing to address how the media portrays religious practices and convictions to its youngest and most impressionable audiences, scholars are missing a critical opportunity to understand the pervasiveness, portrayal, and power of religion in the media.

This study therefore aims to begin filling the gap in religion and media studies on children’s visual media by using qualitative media analysis to explore how PBS Kids portrays religion in its 2015 and 2016 winter holiday specials. In doing so, the first section of this study further describes the need for analyses of children’s visual media in the emerging field of religion and media studies. The following section then defines the sources, methods, and terminology utilized in this analysis and referenced in the subsequent findings discussion.

---


Ultimately, the findings section illustrates how *PBS Kids* depicts Christmas most often, but it obscures the religious aspects of Christmas with commercialized and generalized illustrations of holiday activities, lessons, and symbols. Conversely, *PBS Kids* occasionally features other religious holidays such as Chanukah, Saint Lucia Day, and Kwanzaa. Nevertheless, it exemplifies the religious traditions and significances of non-Christmas holidays in much greater depth than Christmas.

Finally, this study concludes with a discussion on the major implications of its findings. More specifically, by calling attention to religion in children’s visual media, these findings not only help fill a major research gap in religion and media studies, but they also raise several important questions for additional research in this field regarding patterns in religious portrayals in children’s programming. Furthermore, findings from this study have the powerful potential to prompt scholars as well as producers of children’s visual media and those responsible for children’s spiritual lives to think critically about the ways in which televised religious messages influence children’s understandings of and attitudes towards religion. Nonetheless, before any party may address these concerns, religion and media studies scholars must first expand their knowledge of portrayals of religion in children’s visual media by conducting further analyses of children’s programming across a variety of networks and genres.

**Need for Attention to Religion in Children’s Visual Media**

Over the past twenty years, religion and media studies has experienced significant communal growth, conceptual development, and literary expansion. In the early 1990s, religious studies and media studies scholars first came together to study the tensions between

---

religious institutions and the media.\textsuperscript{8} According to Al-Azami, this initial research opened scholars’ eyes to the complex interrelationship between religion, media, and society and revealed the need for greater interdisciplinary study on this relationship. Thus, in 1997 Hoover and Lundby brought together scholars from communication studies, religious studies, and several of the social sciences to establish media, religion, and culture as a prominent multidisciplinary and multicultural area of research within religion and media studies.\textsuperscript{9} Hoover and Lundby’s book raised a number of important questions on religion and media as they relate to specific cultural phenomena, thereby inspiring additional edited collections such as those by Clark on media, religion, and consumerism and by Lynch and Mitchell on religion, media, and everyday life.\textsuperscript{10}

As religion and media studies continued to attract diverse scholarly interest worldwide, Stout and Buddenbaum recognized the need for a common forum in which scholars could analyze the interplay between religion and media and discuss the diverse implications of this research. Therefore, in 2002 Stout and Buddenbaum created the \textit{Journal of Media and Religion}.\textsuperscript{11} In addition to this foundational publication, several organizations devoted to the subject were also established, such as the International Society for Media, Religion, and Culture as well as the Media and Religion Interest Group within the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Through such publications and organizations, religion and media studies scholars are currently working to define key concepts, methodology, and 


\textsuperscript{11} Stout, \textit{Media and Religion}, 1.
terminology to use for research in this field. As Stout surmises, scholars are also in the early stages of analyzing the fundamental “history, theory, cultural contexts, and professional aspects between media and religion.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, religion and media studies is yet in the process of constructing its communal and conceptual foundations.

During the field’s most recent developmental period, the study of religion in adult visual media emerged as a popular area of interest. In particular, within the past ten years scholars from a variety of fields have begun to examine if and how movies aimed at audiences ages 13 and above depict religion through symbolism, plotlines, and subtexts.\textsuperscript{13} While many of these studies, including Kozlovic’s “Sacred Cinema,” focus on Christian undertones in films, a number of analyses also exist on portrayals of Judaism and Buddhism on screen such as books by Gertel and Suh.\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, several scholarly articles discuss depictions of various religions in popular adult television programming, ranging from animated sitcoms such as \textit{South Park} to drama series such as \textit{Mad Men}.\textsuperscript{15} In these studies, scholars oftentimes place their findings in context with larger scholarly conversations in their individual fields. For example, historian Edwards uses his analysis on religious themes in \textit{Doctor Who} to show historians studying changes in religious

\textsuperscript{12} Stout, \textit{Media and Religion}, ix.


education in Britain how the media is a primary catalyst for developments in religious instruction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.\(^{16}\) Overall, the wide interdisciplinary and interfaith attention to the portrayal of religion in adult visual media has allowed scholars to contribute unique, multi-faceted perspectives on the relationships between religion and media, thereby enriching research in not only religion and media studies but also several other academic fields.

While literature on religion in adult visual media continues to proliferate, no current literature to my knowledge addresses how children’s visual media portrays religion. Searches on Google Scholar and numerable academic databases reveal that no scholarly works exist on depictions of religion in films and television shows directed at children. Furthermore, Akseer, Bajovic, Bosacki, and Elliott are the only known team of researchers to explore how televised representations of religion shape children’s spiritualties.\(^{17}\) Using questionnaires to survey children on the prevalence of religious messages in children’s media consumption, 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.\(^{18}\) Therefore, more refined and focused research is necessary to discover both what messages children’s television programs send on religion and how those messages influence young viewers.


Sources, Methods, and Terminology

To address the gap in religion and media studies literature on the portrayal of religion in children’s visual media, this study investigates how PBS Kids depicts religion in its 2015 and 2016 holiday specials. PBS Kids is an ideal source of study, because it is a highly popular, accessible, and educational source. According to a 2015 report by the Nielson Company, over 82 percent of U.S. households have 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. Additionally, Nielsen found that over two-thirds of children ages two to eight watch PBS Kids. Parents also favor PBS Kids, and for over one decade PBS Kids has held the title of parent’s top trusted educational media brand for children. This achievement reflects PBS Kids’ mission statement: to serve as “America’s largest classroom” and “trusted window to the world” by teaching children fundamental educational concepts as well as exposing children to diverse cultural practices. In pursuit of its educational mission, PBS Kids annually airs “high-quality, educational holiday programming that the whole family can enjoy.” Thus, with their widespread viewership and educational, holiday focus, PBS Kids’ holiday specials are opportune starting points for studying the ways in which children’s visual media portrays religion.

---


In analyzing *PBS Kids*’ 2015/2016 holiday specials, this study utilizes qualitative media analysis, a user-friendly, well-established methodology across academic disciplines. Qualitative Media Analysis (QMA), also know as qualitative content analysis, qualitative data analysis, and qualitative document analysis, is a “method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material…by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame.”

This process of classifying, categorizing, and coding may be applied to a wide range of print and digital documents, and it effectively operates as either a stand-alone or mixed methodology. As a result, QMA suits several types of studies and has become a popular methodology amongst scholars in a variety of fields including communication studies, history, and education.

Therefore, for scholars in the interdisciplinary field of religion and media studies, QMA offers a solid, systematic approach to analyzing religion in children’s visual media.

For this QMA of *PBS Kids*’ holiday specials, eight episodes aired in 2015 and 2016 were analyzed. In order to select the specials which most engage religious winter holidays, progressive theoretical sampling was used: a sampling strategy that “refers to the selection of materials based on an emerging understanding of the topic under investigation.”

A protocol or data collection document was then created and revised two-thirds of the way through the analysis process to best 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

---


25 Altheide and Schneider, 56.
images and music. Additionally, the protocol was also used to systematically collect information on the intended learning outcomes, length in minutes, original release date, producer(s), and target audience of each special (see Appendix A for the protocol structure and Appendix B for an example of a completed protocol). After the data for all eight specials was recorded, categorized, and coded for keywords and concepts, it was analyzed for extremes and patterns within categories, and correlations between categorical findings were also studied. The following sections describe the strongest, most salient findings on the portrayal of religion in *PBS Kids’* 2015 and 2016 holiday specials as well as identify some important questions these findings raise for religion and media studies scholars, producers of children’s visual media, and those concerned with children’s spiritual development.

The findings and implications sections use the terms “generalized,” “commercialized,” and “sacred” in discussing the portrayal of religion in *PBS Kids’* holiday specials. Generalized depictions of winter holiday celebrations refer to anything seasonally-related without specific affiliations to 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 sacred category includes all holiday activities, lessons, and symbols directly connected to traditional observances and meanings of a particular religion.

Overall, holiday portrayals fit within the generalized, commercialized, and sacred categories in various degrees. For example, a Christmas tree adorned with an angel clearly fits
the sacred classification. However, a tree with a star topper may suit the generalized
classification more than the sacred depending on the degree to which the tree’s context presents
the star as an allusion to the Star of Bethlehem versus a ubiquitous decoration. Furthermore, the
terms general, commercial, and sacred are subject to interpretation and may change depending
on the religious and cultural contexts in which they are used. However, the purpose of explaining
these terms is not to argue their absolute meanings but to define the major vocabulary used in
this QMA and in the QMAs this study hopefully inspires, thereby setting a foundation for
developing key terminology for the study of religion in children’s visual media.

Findings from a QMA of Religion in PBS Kids’ Holiday Specials

Christmas Activities

Of the eight episodes analyzed, six episodes feature Christmas as either the only holiday
of focus or as one of several holidays depicted. Primarily, these Christmas specials illustrate
general winter and commercial activities rather than Christian Christmas observances. For
example, Curious George “A Very Monkey Christmas” portrays several seasonal and
commercially-driven activities, and it does not depict any sacred Christmas traditions. In “A
Very Monkey Christmas,” best friends George the Monkey and the Man in the Yellow Hat
attempt to make Christmas perfect for one another through holiday preparations and presents.\textsuperscript{26}
The episode opens with George and the Man strolling around town and observing the
commercial ways in which their friends are getting “ready for Christmas day to come.” In doing
so, George and the Man see people assembling shop window displays, comparing items on

\textsuperscript{26} Curious George: A Very Monkey Christmas, directed by Scott Heming (2009; Los Angeles:
Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2016), DVD.
Christmas wish lists, and scurrying down the streets holding shopping bags and wrapped gifts. George and the Man partake in several of their own general, non-religious holiday preparations as well including buying their Christmas tree, making basic holiday greeting cards, and frosting gingerbread cookies.

Throughout the episode, characters use the word “perfect” thirteen times to describe decorations, gifts, and trees as they face the commercial pressures of perfectionism. In particular, Hundley, the Lobby Man’s dog, obsesses over the festive appearance of the lobby, and he panics when George and the Man accidently cause the decorations to fall off the lobby tree. Similarly, Bill, a young employee at Renkins’ Tree Farm, holds precise notions of what a “prize-winning” Christmas tree looks likes, and he insists that George and the Man follow his detailed guide for picking the “proper” tree. However, George and the Man worry less about the quality of their tree and more about finding the perfect presents for one another, and their anxiety over gifts increases as Christmas day approaches. The Man especially frets that he will “ruin Christmas for [George]” if he cannot decipher George’s Christmas list before the stores close for the holidays. Although George maintains his excitement for Christmas, he too becomes anxious in his race to make the perfect present for the Man and to complete other holiday to-dos before Christmas day.

Many of the common seasonal activities and commercial themes shown in “A Very Monkey Christmas” also appear in “The Cat and the Hat Knows a Lot About Christmas,” especially the pressure for haste. In this special, The Cat in the Hat and his young friends Nick and Sally rush to bring Ralph the Reindeer back to Santa and his parents in time for Christmas. While Nick and Sally prioritize helping Ralph, they also wish to hurry to get home to their

---

27 The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About Christmas, directed by Tony Collingwood and Steve Neilson (2010; Toronto: Portfolio Entertainment, 2012), DVD.
parents, because, like George, they want to help with commercial Christmas preparations such as wrapping presents and writing wish lists. About halfway through the special, when the kids, the Cat, and Ralph arrive at a quiet beach, the Cat indirectly critiques the commotion of the holiday season by briefly remarking “isn’t it peaceful here? No noise, no hustle and bustle.” Nevertheless, the hustle and bustle theme persists as the kids, the Cat, and Ralph encounter other animals hurrying home for the holidays.

Similarly, Peg + Cat’s “The Christmas Problem” not only illustrates the commercialism prominent in the Curious George and The Cat in the Hat specials, but it accentuates this theme by augmenting the characters’ holiday haste and stress and by focusing on Santa Claus: the primary figure of Christmas commercialism. In “The Christmas Problem,” Peg and Cat visit the North Pole where they find Santa and his elves scrambling to prepare for Christmas. Apparently, “children today want so many presents” that the North Pole is backed up with gift orders, and Santa is “freaking out.” Eventually, Peg invites Santa and the elves to take a relaxing hot cocoa break in her spaceship, but then the ship accidently blasts off into space with Santa and the elves. Now, it is Peg’s turn to panic, because her and Cat must prepare all of the presents themselves. Thus, like George, the Man, Nick, and Sally, Peg must combat her worry over time as she works to make the present-machine more efficient and to pack the one hundred sleighs necessary to carry all the extra gifts. Fortunately, her friend Ramone swoops in to remind her to approach these challenges “one step at a time.” Although Ramone’s advice directly refers to the special’s lesson on mathematical problem-solving, his words also critique the hustle and bustle.

---


29 Peg + Cat: A Totally Awesome Christmas, directed by Cory Bobiak (2014; Pittsburg: The Fred Rogers’ Company, 2015), DVD.
commercial theme by reminding Peg to stay calm and slow down. Nonetheless, with its robust focus on Santa, presents, and haste, the Peg + Cat Christmas special encapsulates commercialism.

While “A Very Monkey Christmas,” “The Cat and the Hat Knows a Lot About Christmas,” and “The Christmas Problem” only illustrate general holiday activities and commercial themes, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” is the sole PBS Kids’ Christmas special to incorporate some sacred Christian observances amidst generalized and commercialized Christmas portrayals. Like many of the characters in the previous three shows, Arthur and his friends try to make the holidays perfect, which, to Arthur, means playing in the snow, eating a big turkey dinner, and buying the “perfect” presents for his family. Thus, he becomes distressed when the weather forecast remains snowless, his father changes the Christmas meal menu, and the tea set he bought for his mother shatters. Similarly, Buster’s mother Bitsy struggles with holiday stress as she tries to make Christmas perfect for Buster, and she obsesses over getting just the “right” presents and packing in all the special activities she can think of such as taking Buster to “Penguin’s on Ice.” Amidst Arthur and his friends’ attempts at perfect Christmas preparations, they occasionally engage in religious activities. For example, the Read family attends church on Christmas Eve, and they converse about ancient Jerusalem around the dinner table. Later, the Reads even have a supper of “real authentic Christmas food: the kind they might have actually had in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.” Although short, these Christian references nevertheless provide a religious contrast to the generalized and commercialized Christmas activities prevalent throughout the majority of “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” and other PBS Kids’ Christmas specials.

Unlike the five other Christmas specials, *Sid the Science Kid*’s “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” does not include any illustrations of generalized, commercialized, or sacred Christmas activities. In the first few minutes of the episode, five-year-old Sid briefly explains to viewers that his family observes Christmas as well as Chanukah and Kwanzaa, and he says that every year his family “decorates a big tree for Christmas” in their backyard in California. This year, Sid is worried about how he and his family will celebrate Christmas, because they are going to spend the holidays in Minnesota at his Aunt Irene’s home where it is cold and snowy. However, the episode never shows how Sid comes to celebrate Christmas in Minnesota. Instead, the majority of the special focuses on Sid’s time at school as he learns about temperature and weather around the world. Therefore, the celebration of Christmas is not the focal activity of “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” but merely the concept that leads to Sid’s educational activities throughout the episode.

Christmas Lessons

Through such generalized and commercialized Christmas activities, *PBS Kids*’ Christmas specials primarily convey general holiday and educational lessons rather than show the religious significance of Christmas. For example, both “A Very Monkey Christmas” and “The Cat and the Hat Knows a Lot About Christmas” illustrate that family and friends are what make Christmas special. More specifically, George and the Man eventually learn that, while Christmas gifts and decorations may never be perfect, the Christmas season is always joyous when you spend it with the ones you love. The Cat communicates a similar message to Nick, Sally, and Ralph when his

---

31 *Sid the Science Kid: Sid’s Holiday Adventure*, directed by Camilla Calamandrei and David Gumpel (2009; Los Angeles: The Jim Henson Company, 2011), DVD.
reminds them that Christmas is not about the presents but about “bringing families together.” In contrast, *Peg + Cat’s* “The Christmas Problem” and *Sid the Science Kid’s* “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” focus less on the import of celebrating with loved ones and more on subjects such as counting, temperature, and other mathematical and scientific lessons.

The main message concerning Christmas in “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” emphasizes the impossibility of commercial perfection. Like George and the Man, Arthur and his friends learn that, when it comes to holiday activities and preparations, “you don’t always get what you hoped for,” but sometimes you “get something better.” For example, Arthur’s younger sister D.W. throws a fit when she receives a “Quackers” doll instead of the “Tina the Talking Taby” toy she wanted. Nevertheless, after playing with Quackers she soon comes to love and appreciate her gift. Similarly, Buster also finds a better alternative to his mother’s presents and plans by inventing his own holiday called “Baxter Day”: a simple, relaxing day for he and his mother to be together, which, according to Buster, is “the best present of all.”

While challenges to Christmas commercialism are the overarching lessons in “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas,” the *Arthur* special also gives a few facts on the Christian aspects of Christmas. In particular, Arthur’s father teaches Arthur and D.W. about the types of foods early Christians ate in ancient Jerusalem such as roast lamb with turmeric, unleavened bread and pulse, and ground bark drink. His father’s story inspires Arthur to imagine his family as characters in a Bethlehem-like setting, and he pictures them sitting on the hay-covered floor, eating from wooden bowls, and wearing robes. Later, the Brain explains to Arthur that “no one knows what day Jesus was born on” and that “the holiday is in December most likely because that’s when the

---

32 *The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About Christmas.*

33 *Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.*
Romans celebrated the winter solstice.” Finally, towards the end of the episode, Francine’s father briefly mentions that “Christians celebrate Christmas.” Consequently, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” is the PBS Kids’ Christmas specials from this study to mention any variation of the word “Christian.” Therefore, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” stands out as the sole PBS Kids’ special to feature some Christian content beneath general and commercial Christmas lessons.

Christmas Symbols

Predominantly, the PBS Kids’ Christmas specials feature secular holiday images and music, and sacred Christian symbols rarely appear. In all six Christmas episodes, Santa Claus, holiday lights, and decorated trees appear frequently as background images. Primarily, Christmas trees are adorned with basic yellow stars and ball ornaments rather than angels or other sacred objects. Also, images of gifts predominant every episode, with the notable exception of “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” which does not show any presents. Other common seasonal and commercial symbols in PBS Kids’ Christmas specials include candy canes, elves, gingerbread men, reindeer, snowmen, stockings, and toys. Likewise, songs used throughout the Christmas specials are mostly non-religious holiday tunes, with “Deck the Halls” and “Jingle Bells” played most often.

Once again, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” contrasts general holiday symbols with sacred Christmas images and songs. In particular, it illustrates angel tree-toppers, Biblical foods, manger scenery, and the Star of Bethlehem, all of which are central to the plot and actions of the characters rather than merely scattered as background images. For example, the episode includes a segment where Arthur imagines his family living in a barn in Bethlehem similar to the

---

34 *Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.*

35 *Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.*
setting of Jesus’ birth, with Baby Kate lying in a manager like the infant Jesus. Later, at the conclusion of the episode, Arthur’s friend George and his family are shown dancing around their angel-topped Christmas tree as they sing “Nu Är Det Jul Igen”: a traditional Swedish Christmas song about the coming of the Christmas and Easter season. Nevertheless, aside from these Christian images and songs, the Arthur special is loaded with materialistic images of presents, Santa, and toys, and thus “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” exemplifies how PBS Kids’ depicts commercial Christmas symbols at greater length than sacred Christmas symbols.

Chanukah Activities

Four out of the eight episodes analyzed feature Chanukah as either the sole holiday of focus or as one of several holidays depicted, thus making Chanukah the second most portrayed holiday in PBS Kids’ 2015 and 2016 holiday specials. While the PBS Kids’ Christmas specials rarely touch on the Christian aspects of Christmas, the Chanukah episodes consistently explore the religious significance of Chanukah through illustrations of sacred Jewish traditions, lessons, and symbols. For example, in Peg + Cat’s “The Hanukkah Problem,” Albert Einstein invites Peg and Cat to his home to celebrate Chanukah, and he introduces them to several Chanukah traditions such as lighting the menorah and playing dreidel.\(^\text{36}\) Similarly, in “Sid’s Holiday Adventure,” Sid talks about how much he loves to light the menorah and play the dreidel game with his family. However, Sid only briefly mentions these activities in the opening of the special, and he never engages in any Chanukah traditions. Likewise, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” mainly shows general winter and commercial activities, but the Arthur special nonetheless portrays a

\(^{36}\text{Peg + Cat: The Hanukkah Problem, directed by Cory Bobiak (2013; Pittsburg: The Fred Rogers’ Company, 2014), DVD.}\)
few Chanukah traditions as well through Francine Frensky, Arthur’s Jewish friend. At the Frensky Family Chanukah celebration, for instance, Francine and her family light the menorah, play the dreidel game, and recite blessings in Hebrew.

The fourth Chanukah special, *Super Why!*’s “Judith’s Happy Chanukah,” stands out from the other three specials for the great length and depth in which it illustrates Chanukah traditions. In the beginning of the episode, Whyatt receives an invitation to Red’s Gramma’s house for Chanukah, so Whyatt’s big question for the day is “How do you celebrate Chanukah?” To answer Whyatt’s question, the Super Readers jump into the book *Judith’s Happy Chanukah* in order to see how Judith and her family observe Chanukah. Judith is enthusiastic about her Chanukah traditions, and she is excited to teach the Super Readers “everything about Chanukah.” First, Judith instructs them on how to play the dreidel game, including how to pronounce and interpret the Hebrew letters on the dreidel and how to win chocolate coins. Then, Judith’s mother shows the Super Readers how to make latkes or “potato pancakes” using eggs, flour, oil, and potatoes. Finally, when the sun sets, Judith tells the Super Readers that it is time to light the menorah, and her father leads them through the ceremony. In doing so, he uses the shamash or “helper candle” to light the other candles on the menorah, and then he invites everyone to join him in a dance around the table as they sing “Chanukah, O Chanukah.”

Chanukah Lessons

*PBS Kids’* Chanukah specials not only consistently portray authentic Jewish traditions, but they also frequently describe the religious significance of those traditions. Once again,

---

37 *Super Why!: Judith’s Happy Chanukah*, directed by Traci Paige Johnson (2010; Ardmore: Out of the Blue Productions, 2014), DVD.
“Judith’s Happy Chanukah” provides the most detailed explanations of Chanukah traditions. When the Super Readers first arrive at Judith’s home, Whyatt asks Judith “Why do you celebrate Chanukah?” In response, Judith’s pulls out a picture book and tells the Super Readers the story of the “teensy bit of oil” which “made light for eight whole nights!” To celebrate that miracle, Judith explains that “we light a menorah…every night for eight nights.” Later as they make latkes, Judith’s mother tells the Super Readers that “we cook the latkes in oil, because it helps us remember the oil that lasted for eight nights.” Throughout the special, the Super Readers repeat and reinforce these Chanukah lessons by posing rhetorical questions to viewers such as “How many candles does Judith need to light on the last night of Chanukah?” In the end, the Super Readers review everything they learned about Chanukah, and they conclude that the celebration of Chanukah is all about “special traditions.”

While the other three Chanukah specials do not discuss the significance of Chanukah and its observances as thoroughly as “Judith’s Happy Chanukah,” they touch on similar lessons. For example, in “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas,” Muffy struggles to understand why Francine would rather go to the Frensky Family Chanukah celebration than attend her own “Holiday Extravaganza” Christmas party. According to Muffy, “you can see your family any old time,” and “it’s not like Chanukah is as important as Christmas.” However, when Francine invites Muffy to her family’s Chanukah celebration, she teaches Muffy some ancient and familial meanings of certain Chanukah traditions like the menorah. By partaking in these traditional Chanukah observances with both family and friends, Francine says she feels pride in her Jewish heritage and in knowing that she is “part of something special.”

---

38 Judith’s Happy Chanukah.
39 Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.
In contrast to *Arthur* and *Super Why!*, *Sid the Science Kid* and *Peg + Cat* primarily use Chanukah traditions as teaching tools for academic concepts rather than Jewish lessons. More specifically, in “Sid’s Holiday Adventure,” Sid shares with Teacher Susie and his friends his worries about celebrating the holidays in the cold of Minnesota, so they spend the day learning about thermometers and different temperatures around the world. The subject of holidays emerges only once during school when Teacher Susie sings about the month of December: a “special time for holidays” when “friends and families get together...all around the world.”

Likewise, *Peg + Cat*’s “The Hanukkah Problem” also uses Chanukah traditions for educational purposes such as when Einstein gives Peg and her friends a lesson on 2D and 3D shapes using the dreidel as a model. Nevertheless, Einstein also teaches Peg a few facts behind Chanukah traditions, and he emphasizes how “Chanukah is a really special winter holiday” all about the number eight. He further explains that the celebration of Chanukah lasts for eight days, and for every one of those days you light a candle on a “special candle holder” called a menorah.

Therefore, the Jewish significances of Chanukah and its traditions may not be the primary focus of each *PBS Kids’* Chanukah special, but overall these episodes consistently uncover some of the religious import behind Chanukah.

**Chanukah Symbols**

The 2015 and 2016 *PBS Kids’* Chanukah specials are limited but consistent in their illustrations of Chanukah imagery. In all four episodes studied, the dreidel and the menorah appear often as background images, and the characters use these sacred items to explain and/or

---

*Sid’s Holiday Adventure.*

*The Hanukkah Problem.*
engage in Chanukah traditions. Additionally, the *Arthur* and *Super Why!* specials illustrate chocolate coins as major Chanukah symbols, and the coins in “Judith’s Happy Chanukah” even have Hebrew letters etched on them, thereby illustrating the historic language of the Jewish people. “Judith’s Happy Chanukah” also displays several traditional Chanukah objects and foods not included in the other episodes such as blue and white streamers, kippahs, latkes, and rugelach. Although *Sid the Science Kid* mentions Sid’s tradition of making latkes, the actual image of latkes never appears. In fact, unlike the other three Chanukah specials, “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” is almost entirely free of all holiday imagery. Aside from Sid’s house, which has one menorah on the kitchen counter and one small banner with a collage of dreidels, menorahs, and Stars of David, no other holiday objects or decorations appear in this special, and even the houses Sid and his mother pass on their way to Sid’s school are free of lights and other generic winter holiday décor.

Just as the Chanukah specials have a small variety of images, they also scarcely incorporate Jewish music. Of the four episodes examined in this study, only “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” and “Judith’s Happy Chanukah” utilize music as a means of portraying Chanukah traditions and celebrations. For example, at the Frensky Family Chanukah party, Klezmer music plays on the stereo in Francine’s apartment. Also, while lighting the menorah, Francine and her family sing blessings over the candles in Hebrew. In “Judith’s Happy Chanukah,” the tune to “I Have a Little Dreidel” plays in the background as Judith teaches the Super Readers about the dreidel game. Also, as Judith, her parents, and the Super Readers dance around the table at the end of the menorah lighting ceremony, they sing “Chanukah, O Chanukah.” Thus, the *Super Why!* and *Arthur* specials are the only episodes to directly connect music to the celebration of Chanukah.
Saint Lucia Day and Kwanzaa

Although *PBS Kids’* 2015 and 2016 holiday specials primarily portray Christmas and Chanukah, they occasionally feature other winter holidays such as Saint Lucia Day and Kwanzaa. In doing so, these specials are inconsistent in the depth in which they illustrate the traditions, lessons, and symbols of these holidays. In particular, “Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” is the only *PBS Kids’* special to mention Saint Lucia Day, and while its depictions of Saint Lucia Day take up less than two minutes of the hour-long episode, the *Arthur* special nonetheless includes several details surrounding Saint Lucia Day’s celebration and significance. George, one of Arthur’s classmates, shares with the class how “in Sweden, they have a parade every morning on December 13th where people follow the Queen of Light who wears a crown of candles.” As George describes Saint Lucia Day, Arthur and his friends imagine a girl dressed as Saint Lucia in white robes and a crown of candles as she leads a parade of people through a Swedish town. The people in the parade carry candles and sing “Sanka Lucia.” Stjärngossar or children dressed in cone-shaped hats with gold stars also walk in the parade. At the end of George’s presentation, he invites his classmates to taste some lutefisk that his grandparents sent him from Sweden. Therefore, this short segment on Saint Lucia Day condenses, explains, and displays several traditional aspects of this Swedish Christian holiday.

“Arthur’s Perfect Christmas” also quickly but thoroughly portrays Kwanzaa through the Brain, another one of Arthur’s classmates. When the Brain tells Arthur and Buster that his family celebrates Kwanzaa, he explains how Kwanzaa begins the day after Christmas and that it was “invented for African Americans by Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966.” The Brain goes on to

---

42 Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.

43 Arthur’s Perfect Christmas.
teach Arthur and Buster about the significance of Kwanzaa’s colors and how shades of green, black, and red represent freedom, unity, and Africans’ struggle for freedom. In the Brain’s home, green, black, and red balloons hang on the walls, and on the floor sits bowls of corn, vegetables, and mazao (crops); a kinara with seven candles; a unity cup; and zawadi (wrapped presents or “meaningful gifts”), all on top of a mkeke or mat. As his family arranges these decorations and sacred objects, they listen to a CD of African drum rhythms. Similarly, “Sid’s Holiday Adventure” also discusses the celebration of Kwanzaa, but it minimally illustrates Kwanzaa activities, lessons, and symbols. The only Kwanzaa tradition Sid mentions is the lighting of the kinara candles, and images of the kinara, crops, and unity cup only appear momentarily as background images. Thus, in terms of screen time and prominence of symbols, *PBS Kids’* 2015 and 2016 holiday specials minimally portray Kwanzaa.

Of course, it is important to note that Kwanzaa is a cultural celebration, not a religious holiday. However, Kwanzaa is comparable to Christmas and Chanukah in many ways such as how it is rooted in the historic events of a lineage of people and how the celebration of Kwanzaa is characterized by key rituals such as candle-lighting and by symbols such as the colors green and red. Therefore, for this analysis of *PBS Kids’* portrayals of holiday activities, lessons, and symbols, Kwanzaa is a relevant subject of study.

**Implications for Religion and Media Studies Scholars and Other Interested Parties**

By addressing the important yet unexplored topic of religion in children’s visual media, this study makes several significant contributions to the emerging field of religion and media studies. Although scholars have only focused thus far on the portrayal of religion in adult visual media.

---

44 *Sid’s Holiday Adventure.*
media, this study of PBS Kids’ 2015 and 2016 holiday specials demonstrates that religious content is also prevalent in children’s television programming. In particular, this QMA reveals that PBS Kids holiday episodes depict Christmas most often but obscure Christmas’s religious traditions and significance with commercialism. Conversely, PBS Kids’ specials occasionally feature other religious holidays such as Chanukah, Saint Lucia Day, and Kwanzaa, but they exemplify the sacred observances and import of these holidays in much greater depth than Christmas. Thus, these findings not only illustrate the need for greater attention to children’s visual media by religion and media studies scholars, but they also provide direction for scholars by inspiring questions for future studies.

Overall, these findings raise several important questions on the consistencies and explanatory variables in portrayals of religion in children’s visual media. For example, do patterns in PBS Kids’ holiday portrayals reflect larger trends across children’s television programming? If so, what factors influence these particular patterns and larger trends? Does an episode’s release year correlate to the holiday it portrays, thereby revealing distinct patterns and changes in televised holiday depictions over time? In this QMA, for instance, it was found that, in terms of release year, the most recent PBS Kids’ holiday specials are the major Chanukah episodes, “Peg + Cat: The Hanukkah Problem” (2014) and “Judith’s Happy Chanukah” (2015). Could this current emphasis on Chanukah potentially indicate a shift in children’s television away from a heavy Christmas focus towards a wider, multi-faith perspective? Likewise, scholars may ask how portrayals of religion in children’s television might reflect attitudes, practices, and understandings of religious winter holidays in American culture. For instance, could PBS Kids’ illustrations of Christmas commercial activities and symbols mirror the boom of US retail business during the holiday season and the nationwide proliferation of images of Santa and
presents in winter store displays and advertisements? Finally, future studies should also pay close attention to the political economies and mission statements of the networks producing children’s visual media and ask questions such as how does *PBS Kids’* non-profit structure shape the ways in which it depicts each holiday? To what extent does the educational mission of *PBS Kids* include attention to religious literacy?

As religion and media studies scholars pursue further research and expand their knowledge on patterns and explanations behind illustrations of religion in children’s visual media, they may then work with scholars in other fields such as child development to build on their research and question how the media’s illustrations of religion might affect children’s attitudes, beliefs, and understandings of religion. For example, if additional QMAs on children’s holiday specials also find commercialized portrayals of Christmas, could this imply that children will come to see Christmas as having more commercial than religious significance? How might commercialized representations of Christmas shape how children view Christianity as a whole? Similarly, if holiday specials consistently illustrate non-Christmas winter holidays such as Chanukah less often but with greater attention to sacred aspects of those celebrations, could children come to believe that other holidays hold more religious import than Christmas holds? If so, how might children come to view Judaism and other non-Christian religions as a whole? Alternatively, considering that 92% of the American population celebrates Christmas, is it fair to assume that children already 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?\(^\text{45}\)

Finally, to enhance scholars’ critical thinking in investigating implications of religious portrayals in children’s programming, scholars could invite other related parties into their conversations including media producers and those with interests in children’s spiritual development such as parents and religious educators. Together, these parties may delve into questions on how each invested group should respond to current portrayals of religion in children’s visual media. For example, how can media producers alter portrayals of religion in children’s programming to best meet children’s developmental and educational needs? Similarly, how can parents and religious educators help children navigate and interpret religious messages on screen? In doing so, could parents and religious educators emphasize certain sacred aspects of their own holiday traditions in order to balance or counter deficient messages children receive from visual media?

Of course, before any party can fruitfully address these and other concerns, religion and media studies scholars must first build on this current study by conducting additional QMAs of children’s visual media across additional networks and genres. After all, this study identifies children’s programs as 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.  

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.

---

Works Cited


Appendix A

Protocol for Analyzing Portrayals of Religion in PBS Kids’ 2015/2016 Holiday Specials

1. Title
2. Series
   a. Target Audience Age Range
   b. General Learning Outcome(s)
3. Length in Minutes
4. Producer(s):
   a. Name
      i. Primary Location
5. Initial Release Date
6. Holiday
7. Plot Synopsis
8. Holiday Observances/Activities Illustrated:
9. Lessons:
   a. Overall Message
   b. Religious Significance/Origins
10. Holiday Symbols:
    a. Images
    b. Music
11. Miscellaneous Notes
12. Summary
Appendix B

Example Protocol for “Judith’s Happy Chanukah”

1. “Judith's Happy Chanukah”
2. *Super Why!*
   a. Children ages 3 to 6
   b. Reading and social skills
3. 25 minutes
4. Producer(s):
   a. Out of the Blue Productions
      i. Ardmore, Pennsylvania, United States
5. December 7th, 2015
6. Chanukah
7. Plot:
   a. Whyatt receives an invitation to Red’s Gramma’s House for Chanukah. Before he goes, he wants to learn how to celebrate Chanukah, so enlists the help of the Super Readers and a storybook character named Judith.
8. Holiday Observances/Activities:
   a. Decorating
      i. Blue/white paper chains and table cloth
      ii. Dreidel streamers
   b. Making latkes
      i. Potato pancakes
      ii. Lists ingredients
   c. Judith tells a simplified version of Chanukah miracle story
   d. Playing dreidel
      i. Play on the last night
         1. “Hey” = take half
         2. “Shin” = put one in
         3. “Gimel” = take all
      ii. Use chocolate coins
   e. Lighting the menorah
      i. Lit at sunset
      ii. Shamash = helper candle
      iii. Father wears kippah when lighting candles
      iv. Dancing and singing around the table to “Chanukah, O Chanukah”
9. Lessons:
   a. You celebrate Chanukah with traditions
   b. Religious Lessons
      i. Chanukah miracle story
         1. “We cook latkes in oil to help us remember the oil that burned for eight nights”
      ii. Judith explains meanings of Hebrew letters on the dreidel
      iii. “What do we do to celebrate Chanukah?”
         1. Traditions!
iv. Explains how to do many traditions (see above)

10. Holiday Symbols:
   a. Hebrew letters, dreidel, kippah, chocolate coins, latkes, blue/white decorations, rugelach, menorah, shamash
   b. “I Have a Little Dreidel” and “Chanukah, O Chanukah”

11. Miscellaneous Notes:
   a. Super Readers’ attitude towards Chanukah: enthusiasm and curiosity
      i. Whyatt: “Why do you celebrate Chanukah?”
      ii. Pig: “I love this game!”
   b. Tests audience’s knowledge to reinforce lessons:
      i. “How many candles does Judith need to light on the last night of Chanukah?”
      ii. “How do we celebrate Chanukah?”
   c. Also emphasizes importance of celebrating with family and friends
      i. Red’s “favorite tradition” is celebrating Chanukah with others
      ii. Judith celebrates with parents
      iii. Red celebrates with Gramma
   d. Does not mention the words “Jew,” “Jewish,” or “Judaism”

12. “Judith’s Happy Chanukah” not only illustrates Chanukah traditions but also explains the religious significance of them. The Super Readers learn how to play dreidel, make latkes, and light the menorah, and they learn that these activities are important Chanukah traditions. For example, Judith tells the Super Readers about the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days, and later, when making latkes, Judith’s mother explains that “we cook the latkes in oil to remind us of the oil that lasted for eight days.” In the end, the Super Readers conclude that Chanukah is all about practicing special traditions. This special further emphasizes these sacred lessons when characters pose rhetorical questions to viewers such as “What do we do to celebrate Chanukah?” and “How many candles does Judith need to light on the last night of Chanukah?” Beneath these lessons, the special illustrates that celebrating with family and friends is also a major part of Chanukah.