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## Religious toys show importance of play, fun

by Teresa Malcolm

TOYING WITH GOD: THE WORLD OF RELIGIOUS GAMES AND DOLLS

By Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris

Baylor Press, \$24.95

Play, faith, ritual and commerce mingle and sometimes clash in the world of religious-themed toys explored in an engaging book by a pair of religious studies professors.

Authors Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris uncover an array of toys from numerous traditions: stuffed dolls of religious figures from Jesus to Buddha to Ganesh; modestly attired Muslim Fulla dolls; a "Missionary Conquest" board game that urges players to "Conquer the world -- for Christ!"; and a Jewish "Plush Plagues Bag" that includes "all 10 Plagues!"

In U.S. culture, at least, the authors have observed ambivalence toward these items. Some products -- such as the "Nunzilla" or a spring-mounted "Dashboard Monk" -- may be meant as parody and aimed at adults, but many toys are created and marketed as means to educate and communicate religious ideals, especially to children. Even so, some see the latter as trivializing faith, possibly hampering a true relationship with God. There is, the authors say, "a basic dualism underlying this unease, a division between religion and play that views them as distinct and separate realms. Religion is serious, games are not."

Religious toys often are explicitly intended to offer a counter to secular toys that lack educational value or are outright harmful -- the "Battle for the Toybox" in the words of one Christian toy company. Witness the Fulla doll, enormously popular in Muslim countries as an alternative Barbie -- manufactured in the same Chinese factory using a very similar mold. Christian dolls sold in the United States recite short Bible verses and come with instructions to the parents for how best to play with them with their child.

But limited, scripted educational intentions of religious toys and games may face an unexpected obstacle: the chaotic, inventive nature of children's unsupervised play, which "may surprise, challenge, and even undermine the goals of both marketing and parents," the authors note.

The array of products is fascinating, but *Toying With God's* greatest strength is in its reflections on the nature of play and its relation to ritual (play often has elements of ritual, but less often -- especially in Abrahamic faiths -- does religious ritual incorporate play), and on the pervasive, yet contradictory, "cult of fun" in U.S. culture.

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