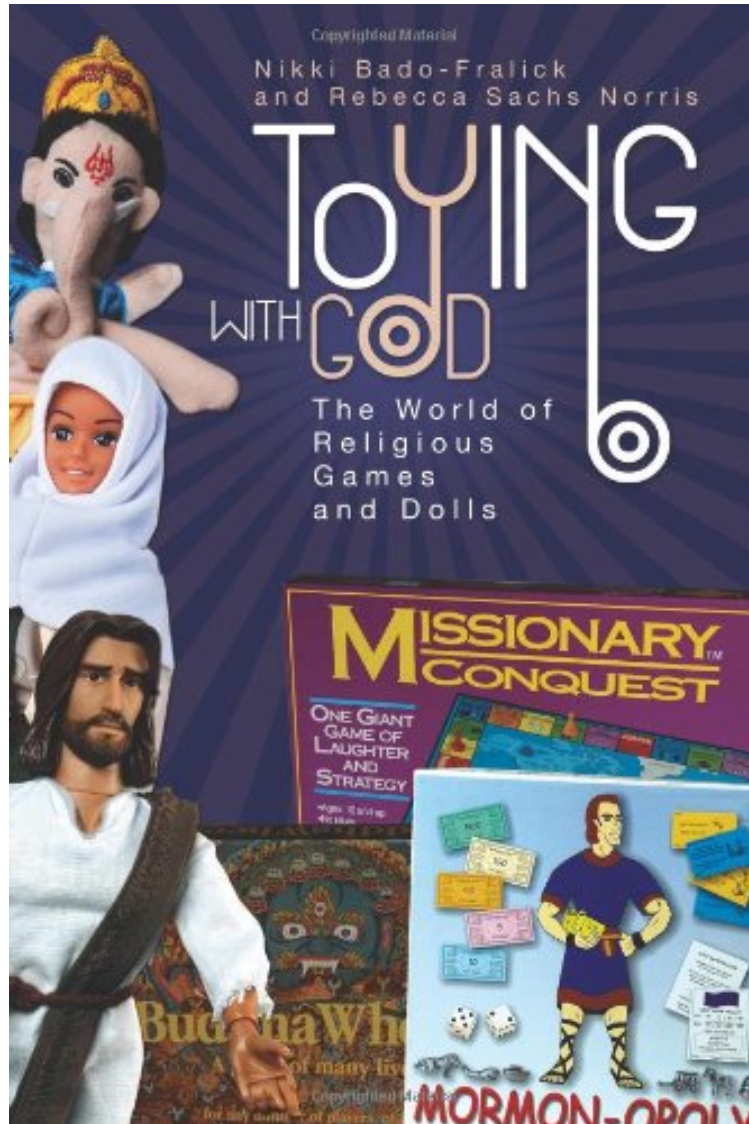


## Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls

*Nikki Bado-Fralick, Rebecca Sachs Norris*  
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**Nikki Bado-Fralick, Rebecca Sachs Norris : Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls:

2 of 5 people found the following review helpful. The Problematic World Revealed by "Toying With God"By Stephen H. HaliczerIn Toying With God; the World of Religious Games and Dolls, Professors Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris explore the problematic, constantly fluctuating boundary between organized religion and religiously themed dolls and

board games. In undertaking this project, both authors drew on their impressive knowledge of the research in the areas of game theory and popular religion combined with their own experiences and observations of the way the young people in their own classes and programs interacted with these products. The result is a fascinating book that presents a unique view of an important and growing segment of the toy and game market while posing a series of provocative questions about the relationship between play and religion. As the authors indicate, the history of religiously themed games and dolls goes back almost to the origins of religion itself. Games were carved into the walls and roofs of Egyptian temples as far back as the fourteenth century BCE and ancient game boards have been found in both Jordan and Egypt dating back to 3500-4000 BCE. Moreover, ancient divinatory practices going back to at least 3000 BCE, that were designed to determine whom the gods favored, are directly related to today's dice games in which Lady Luck instead of the deity is called upon for assistance. Today's 7 billion dollar plus market for religious toys and games presents the consumer with products ranging from board games representing all of the major religions, to a variety of religious dolls. Christianity is well represented by such games as *City of Bondage* and *Journeys of Paul*, Judaism by *Kosherland* and Islam by *Mecca to Medina* and *Race to the Kabah*. Religiously themed dolls are oriented particularly toward young girls in an effort to model conservative and traditional feminine values like modesty (*Gali Girls*, *Fulla*) all designed to combat the "pernicious" influence of Barbie. But play, whether with dolls or within the magical circle formed by the board game is unpredictable and the relationship between the "lived" popular religion represented by toys and games and institutional religion is problematic in the extreme. The authors tell us that the more the creators of religious toys and games attempt to circumscribe play within traditional religious boundaries or mores, the more likely that children (and adult players) "will deviate from the approved script." The lesson of history appears to support the conclusion that while play has always been integral to religion; play has also presented its own unique set of challenges to religious institutions. Drawing a parallel between play and the rituals integral to religious practice, the authors point out that both "create permeable boundaries" and can invert "accepted procedures and hierarchies." The authors direct our attention to the problematic world that religious dolls and games can sometimes create. In doing so, Professors Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris have not only advanced the cause of scholarship but provided the interested reader with a thoughtful and well written introduction to a little known but increasingly important field. It is the hope of this reviewer that the two authors will continue their research and experimentation as the universe of religious toys and games evolves from its plastic and paper manifestations to new formats that "blend" products combining board game and Internet play and using technologies (like the iPhone and the iPad) in new and unexpected ways.

Stephen H. Haliczzer Ph.D. Distinguished Research Professor Northern Illinois University

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Thought-provoking guide to religious games and toys By Timothy P. Jones

In a couple hundred pages of text and pictures, Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris manage to meander across a broad range of religious traditions and to dabble in psychological streams that flow from sources as diverse as Carl Jung and Jean Piaget--all while maintaining their focus on religious expressions and functions of games and dolls. The result is a well-written volume that, if nothing else, provides a thorough compendium of information on the various functions of religious toys. Some discussions in the book border on the trivial. Yet, with few exceptions, even the trivia (such as the extended discussion of "Fulla," a Muslim variation of the Barbie doll) tend to provide fascinating glimpses into what happens when the toy aisle turns religious. Nikki Bado-Fralick directs the religious studies program at Iowa State University, while Rebecca Sachs Norris teaches religious and theological studies at Merrimack College. Both professors utilize religious playthings in their teaching, and they draw many of their examples from their students' in-class experiences with these games and toys. One theme provides a recurring touchstone throughout the text: Both religion and play entail embodied expressions of perceptions or realities that stand outside rational categorization (183-84); as a result, the human experiences of play and of the sacred overlap with one another. The border between ritual and play is "permeable, porous, and mutually interpenetrating" (167). By mingling the corporeal realm with that which cannot be confined to words or matter, both religion and play serve to break down "dualistic ways of perceiving the world" (184). And indeed, from the perspective of Bado-Fralick and Norris, any "set-apartness" or separation between realities is the error that is to be avoided at all cost. The authors wax rhapsodic as they describe how "in many cultures religion is not relegated to a specific hour of Friday, Saturday, or Sunday worship in a building that is set apart. For some, religion is found under a full moon in a grove of trees, in the wind blowing across the plains, or through snow falling on water" (xii). "The sacred is not a separate realm. It is the ground of the universe and is immanent," they write, echoing Paul Tillich's description of God as "the ground of being" (xi). Such a perspective presents an obvious problem for evangelical Christians. In contradistinction to the perspective presented in *Toying with God*, there is for Christians a real and authentic dualism--though not of the sort that the Gnostics derived from Plato or even of the sort that Bado-Fralick and Norris see in the setting apart of certain days and places for worship. God is separate from his world yet present within his world, and he has revealed himself to humanity in Jesus Christ. The Christian distinction is between that which is "in Christ" and that which is outside of Christ. For Christians, it is not humanity's experience of the "ground of the universe" that draws together the spiritual and the corporeal in perfect harmony but the incarnation and the redemption that has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. Despite these difficulties, *Toying with God* provides a starting-point for much fruitful reflection. Bado-Fralick and Norris rightly point out that, for a religious

theme or character to be produced as a game or toy, some aspect is likely to be "watered down for mass consumption" (117). Jesus dolls and action figures spout a limited list of aphorisms that will be palatable to a particular target audience (180). Games produced to convey Christian truth boast that "no Bible knowledge" is needed to play (116). The problem that the authors perceive in all of this is that a sacred experience which was once "embedded in a complex historical, cultural, and religious context" becomes separated from a larger tradition and from the faith-community (116-17). For those who take the text of Scripture to represent the authority of Jesus himself, however, the stakes are far higher than mere separation of a sacred experience from a larger tradition or community. God has revealed himself through particular words and works within human history, and these events have been accurately conveyed to us through the authoritative text of Scripture. Because Christian faith is rooted in these particular words and acts in history, these texts and truths are not malleable, freely adaptable to our own whims and styles and experiences. We are responsible not merely to remain connected to a tradition or to a community but to testify truthfully to the historical words and works of God himself. The examples found throughout *Toying with God* suggest that, once the characters and principles in God's metanarrative are converted into playthings, the tendency is to remake God's words and acts to fit the felt needs of the consumer. "This talking Jesus doll is so encouraging, like a real friend," declares the website for the Holy Huggables Jesus doll. "He says things that reassure us of what Jesus says to us in Scripture, like 'I love you and have an exciting plan for your life'" (180). Never mind that these words are not to be found anywhere in Scripture; these are the "encouraging" words that children need a "real friend" to say as they snuggle down to sleep. In the flyer for "Spirit Warriors" action figures, Samson is shown battling Goliath--an encounter which, while intriguing, is not to be found anywhere in the divine metanarrative (49). One Jesus action figure has glow-in-the-dark hands while another comes with accessories to switch water with wine. In board games, biblical truths are extracted from their context such that, for example, Luke 6:35 becomes a proof-text on a card by which lending another player \$600 can result in "20,000 Eternal Treasures" (80). In another game, having earned thirty or more "Testimonies" enables a player to forgive a neighbor (and to gain fifteen bonus Testimonies!), whereas players who have racked up fewer than thirty Testimonies find themselves unable to forgive (81). One wonders where the gospel or the work of the Holy Spirit fits into such scenarios. As Bado-Fralick and Norris note, there is a tendency to "project whatever we need" onto action figures, dolls, and games (67). And yet, if it is God's story that shapes us rather than the other way around, remolding God's works and deeds into games of conquest, talking vegetables, chubby-cheeked cherubs, plush dolls and plastic action figures should raise some significant questions in the minds of Christians. In general, one might say that the importance of accurately conveying a particular historical truth in the present is inversely proportional to the suitability of recasting this event as a game or toy. If the words and works of God in history matter in highly significant ways here and now, remolding these events as playthings becomes problematic at best. The value of *Toying with God* is twofold: It is a useful compendium of information on religious toys and games--this, the authors probably intended. The second value is one which neither Bado-Fralick nor Norris probably planned: For the Christian, the book inadvertently provides evidence of our own proclivity for idolatry even in one of the most mundane areas of life, the ways that we play.<sup>2</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. A work of original and seminal scholarship By Midwest Book Review Every world religion is impacted by popular culture and the economic advantages as well as theological instructional values of games, dolls, and toys based on them. Now this previously overlooked subject is the focus on "Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls", the collaborative work of Nikki Bado-Fralick (Associate Professor and Director of the Religious Studies Program, Iowa State University) and Rebecca Sachs Norris (Associate Professor and Chair of Religious and Theological Studies, Merrimack College). A work of original and seminal scholarship, "Toying With God" is a 210-page, informed and informative compendium providing a historical and analytical survey of the role games, toys, and dolls play within the context of a religious culture, including the underlying commercial implications for those that produce them. Enhanced with a profusion of notes, an extensive bibliography, and a comprehensive index, "Toying With God" is a unique and recommended addition for academic and community library Religious Studies and Popular Culture reference collections and personal reading lists.

Maybe you have seen the board games. Christianity has *Vatican: The Board Game*; *Journeys of Paul*, *Armor of God and Divinity* (the only game to have the imprimatur of the Catholic Church). Islam and Judaism have *Race to the Kabah*, *Mecca to Medina*, *Exodus*, and *Kosherland*. Buddhism has *Karma Chakra* and *Buddha Wheel*. And then there are the dolls--plush and plastic talking Bible dolls, Christian action figures, and talking Muslim dolls that teach Arabic. Have we humans blended fun with spirituality for good or for ill? And what does all of this say about our insatiable need for fun? Written with verve and a healthy dollop of humor, *Toying with God* examines the sometimes zany world of religious games and dolls, from pre-history to today. Packed with examples that propel the narrative (and add immeasurably to readers knowledge of religious trivia), this is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of popular culture and spirituality.

From Publishers Weekly For Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris (religious studies professors at Iowa State University and

Merrimack College, respectively), religious games and dolls are charged with the magic of childhood combined with the mystery of religion. The authors brilliantly use their subject to reveal a complex interplay between worship and the workings of popular culture. A detour into ancient divination practices using dice, magical dolls, and sports as ritual shows these items to be anything but superficial, and raises a central question: why do religious playthings often evoke feelings of unease? Like the religious toys it analyses, this book is at once fun and serious business. Dolls like Buddy Christ and Nunzilla or unwinnable Buddhist board games may produce a few perplexed laughs, but a game like Missionary Conquest, won by setting up the most global missions, has an undeniably colonialist edge. The authors also use toys and dolls to explore consumerism, feminism, politics, and the nature of ritual and play. In this readable and fresh look at religious culture, the authors are critical and respectful. They'd rather cast dice than throw stones. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. An intriguing look at the world of religious toys and games. Ably demonstrating the ubiquity of these objects and the manner in which they have been integrated into a wide variety of religious cultures, this book is an excellent example of how material culture is full of religious belief and practice. --Douglas E. Cowan, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Waterloo, and author of Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen Toying With God is filled with academic research but written in a down-to-earth humorous style, meant to engage all readers--religious or not--at the contemporary intersection of spiritual and popular cultures. --Erica Noonan, The Boston Globe (December 24, 2009) For Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris... religious games and dolls are charged with "the magic of childhood combined with the mystery of religion." The authors brilliantly use their subject to reveal a complex interplay between worship and the workings of popular culture.... In this readable and fresh look at religious culture, the authors are critical and respectful. --Publisher's Weekly (1/11/10) Noting how Religion has become a commodity in Western society, Norris and Bado-Fralick here analyze the world of religious games and toys and the efforts by religions to market their own values within a competitive consumer culture. There is really nothing like this very thoroughly researched work. -- John Lyden, Professor of Religion, Dana College, and author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals From the Inside Flap Did you know--the popular game of Chutes Ladders is derived from a 13th century game designed by a Tibetan lama? even though the Muslim doll "Fulla" was designed as an "anti-Barbie" they look almost the same and are manufactured in the same factory in China? games have been found dating as far back as the 6th millennium BCE? And that the fairies of Irish legend are believed to have played board games? dolls were entombed in ancient crypts in Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and served as companions in the journey to the afterlife?