

Religious games more than childâs play, authors insists

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BOSTON (RNS)—On the first day of her introductory religion class at Merrimack College, professor Rebecca Sachs Norris put her students to work at having some fun.

Rebecca Sachs Norris, chair of religious and theological studies at Merrimack College, plays some of her collected religious games with her students. She and Nikki Bado-Fralick are co-authors of a new book, *Toying With God*. (PHOTO/RNS/Courtesy Merrimack College)

She assigned teams of three or four students to play some of the many religious board games that fill her office shelves. Weeks later, they had to present their classmates with what they gleaned from each game.

As one team discussed [BuddhaWheel](#), a game that teaches about Buddhism, Norris, chair of Merrimack's religious and theological studies department, asked, "Can you win this game?"

"One of them said: 'Well, yes, but it takes a very, very long time! You just keep getting born over and over and over again.'

"I said, 'Exactly, that's it!', and they learned it in a way that is very different."

Norris and Nikki Bado-Fralick, an associate professor and director of religious studies at Iowa State University, examined the educational game as one component of the growing market of religious playthings for their book, [*Toying with God*](#), due out in February from Baylor University Press.



It may be a niche market, but it's big business nonetheless: Market-Research estimated a \$6 billion-plus market for religious publishing and products in the United States, with growth fueled since mainstream mega-retailers recently began carrying faith-based toys.

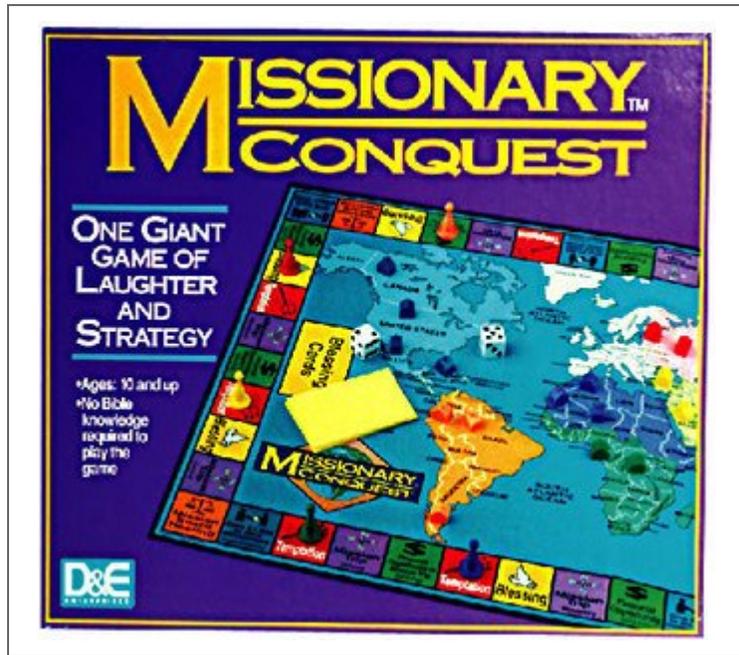
To be sure, some religious playthings are tongue-in-cheek and even potentially offensive. But others, like the board games Episcopopoly, BuddhaWheel and Kosherland, can be educational and even help to reinforce religious identity.

Then there are those that are downright perplexing, like the Job action figure that comes complete with boils and sores; the Plagues Bag, billed as "the Passover/Seder Enrichment Toy"; or the [*Missionary Conquest board game*](#), earnestly billed as "one giant game of laughter and strategy."

Both avid collectors of religious toys and games, Bado-Fralick and Norris said there are many contradictions inherent in the items they studied. Christian games and toys, they observed, frequently are marketed as

educational, yet many claim “no Bible knowledge required.” Some talking dolls, like Queen Esther, play fast and loose with Scripture quotes.

Such contradictions intrigued the academics.



“One of the goals as advertised on the boxes and websites is to give children good, clean, wholesome fun,” Bado-Fralick said. “The (makers of) talking dolls that seem to place an emphasis on Scripture don’t necessarily care about whether the Scripture’s accurate or not, or whether you can reduce the entire (biblical) story of Esther down to about 60 seconds of text, or whether some of the board games ... are really doing a disservice to real religious dialogue.”

The authors acknowledge, too, that the marketing claims of “fun” by toymakers are entirely subjective. The [Hajj Fun Game](#) poses mild questions like, “How many days must a pilgrim spend in performing Hajj (Muslims’ pilgrimage to Mecca)?” The Mahabharata Game, meanwhile, comes with a hefty 38-page instruction booklet that includes an abbreviated version of the Mahabharata, an epic Hindu myth.

While some people might scoff at religious toys and games, viewing them as frivolous or irreverent or both, the book argues that such playthings reflect the reality that today's religion is marketed like many other pastimes and consumer products.

Bado-Fralick noted her toy collections often provoke surprise and raised eyebrows from students and colleagues. Occasionally, some are offended.

"One of my jobs is teaching people how to talk about religion," she said. "There may be people who don't really have a sense of humor, who think there should be a very sharp line between religion and other aspects of life, ... but I think most people are going to be fascinated by what our book says in terms of how it reflects modern life."