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'Learn and Play the Holy Way': Religious Toys and Dolls in the Construction of Religious Gender Identity and Values.

Florence PASCHE GUIGNARD

The interaction of toys, religion and gender is the main focus of this contribution. Distinctive aspects of toys labeled "religious toys" by producers, retailers and buyers will be highlighted and several examples of religious toys and dolls will be explored. Discourses about such toys and dolls form the basis of the material analyzed here. Religious identity often includes a dimension of gender that is constructed through imitation and role-playing games and, mostly for girls, through the use of specific dolls. Religious toys often are adaptations of regular ones. Product descriptions emphasize their efficiency for educating children about religious rituals, symbols and sacred narratives. Although they target buyers of different religious traditions, all religious dolls are very similar in shape and purpose. The representation of the female body, in the shape of a doll, is at stake. Clothes, accessories and booklets sold with the dolls also are highly meaningful. These dolls aim at instilling values that are deemed feminine in various religious backgrounds. They are attributed the power to influence spiritually not only the personality and character of the child who plays with them, but also her developing female body.

Mimicry and travesty are therefore complementary acts in [...] play. For children, the aim is to imitate adults. This explains the success of the toy weapons and miniatures which copy the tools, engines, arms, and machines used by adults. The little girl plays her mother's role as cook, laundress, and ironer. The boy makes believe he is a soldier, musketeer, policeman, pirate, cowboy, Martian, etc. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*

## 1. Introduction

In *Man, Play, and Games*, Roger Caillois rarely questions the issues of toys and gender. This is not surprising for a study first published in 1958, that is,

before the rise of gender studies in academia and before the development of the toy industry of recent decades. It is, however, telling of mainstream [p. 198] academic research interests of that period. In the few passages in which Caillois underlines the differences between the games of boys and girls, especially imitation games (mimicry) with the help of toys, he systematically gives more examples and roles for boys than he does for girls, who are described imitating female roles traditionally ascribed to the domestic sphere. "Detective, pirate, horse or submarine" are roles for a boy, whereas a girl is "rocking a real baby or serving a real meal to the real ladies on her miniature dishes."<sup>1</sup> According to Caillois, playing with dolls "everywhere allows a little girl to imitate her mother or herself be a mother," whereas a "child" (a term which, in this context, means a boy) can "change into an army officer, policeman, jockey, aviator, sailor, cowboy, bus driver."<sup>2</sup> Only eight pages of the English translation of *Les jeux et les hommes* contain the words "toy" or "toys," whereas a keyword search for the term "play" yields over a hundred results and that for "game" yields sixty-seven. Similarly, very few pages of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938, contain the term "toy." These two studies are representative of the fact that toys were "often overlooked as subjects of scholarly inquiry"<sup>3</sup> even when dealing with play and games and even from the perspective of the comparative study of religions. Studies on the interaction of religion and play or games usually concentrate on play and ritual, predominantly play- [p. 199] ing and gaming by adults and by children.<sup>4</sup> The interaction of toys, religion and gender, the focus of this contribution, has seldom been the object of studies. Most studies about games, toys and dolls follow psychological, sociological, educational or economic approaches and rarely pay attention to the links between these items and religion.

In this contribution, we consider toys and dolls as cultural objects<sup>5</sup> and as serious and valid sources for the study of religions; therefore we highlight gendered aspects of toys which are labeled "religious toys" by those who produce, sell or buy them. Nowadays, some toys and games are actively promoted in the name of religious values rather than being forbidden by secular or religious authorities, as was once the case (and still is in some parts of the world.)<sup>6</sup> Promoting certain toys implicitly or explicitly means blaming others because they carry different values. The notions of adaptation, education and imitation are crucial to the understanding of the shaping of a religious identity and practice through religious toys. This identity very often includes a gendered dimension which refers to religious values. It is often constructed through role-playing games and, mostly for girls, through the use of dolls/ which are a particular kind of toy. Their role in the construction of a gendered identity will be demonstrated through examples of religious dolls from various traditions.

"Religious toy" here refers to any toy that has some connection to religions in the sense that it contributes to constructing or strengthening a distinctive identity, to transmitting values, and to teaching about rituals or sacred narratives. However convenient it is to distinguish between [p. 200] "regular"<sup>8</sup> and "religious," this concept of "religious toys" raises several methodological issues and limitations. By searching for religious toys, the results were bound to come from contexts where the distinction between religion and other domains applies, in this case Christianity, Judaism and Islam. By labeling and buying *religious* toys, the makers, sellers and educators<sup>9</sup> who design, sell and buy such toys assume the mostly western distinction between religious and secular. Religion is relevant to all dimensions of their lives and that of their children, including the ludic dimension. However, the need for a specifically religious education ("religion" as a distinct field) may not be felt universally. Among the few explicitly Hindu religious toys retrieved, most are designed for children living outside India, who may feel a sense of religious alterity and a need to construct and strengthen a distinctive religious identity.<sup>10</sup> Although outside of the scope of this research, fieldwork in non-Western contexts could uncover traditional toys that have strong connections to religious representations and [p. 201] practices,<sup>11</sup> even though they did not receive the same kind of marketing as the examples surveyed here.

The contexts in which toys are played or acquired also contribute to their definition as religious toys. Certain toys are played only in religious contexts (or on religious occasions) and should not be used at other times.<sup>12</sup> It is indeed important to stress the significance of toys as gifts given to children on specific ritual occasions, and the meaning that receiving toys (religious and regular) as gifts takes in the social representation of children's and teenagers' identities.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, religious festivals are occasions where, through gift-giving and receiving, social exchange is reinforced within families and communities.

Several authors have studied the marketing of toys and related economic issues.<sup>14</sup> In addition to fierce competition between the regular leading brands, a number of companies share this alternative market of religious toys and dolls, advertising and selling their products internationally on the internet. The few selected brands given here as examples do not account for the great variety of religious toys but are nevertheless representative. [p. 202] This easy access to product descriptions and pictures allowed me to retrieve sufficient explicit information from the web sites of toy companies and toy sellers. It forms the basis of the material considered here.<sup>15</sup> Instead of just examining the toys themselves as objects, information was gathered

from discourses and comments available in the context of sale. Articles from newspaper archives and blogs provided information about religious toys and the ways they are perceived by buyers and, sometimes, users. Opinions from parents (mostly mothers) were collected by reading parenting forums and, occasionally, by interacting with users through posting specific questions. In addition, large and small toy shops were visited, and owners asked about religious toys whenever possible.<sup>16</sup> Toy catalogues were collected. Interviews with daycare managers, school teachers, parents, church leaders, and managers at local "toy libraries"<sup>17</sup> were an additional source of information. Since the children actually playing with religious toys and dolls could not be interviewed directly, their voices were taken into account only through adults' opinions.

Most of the examples mentioned here are toys-not games, video games, or board games. The distinction between games and toys is that the latter do not need explicit rules to be played with, but allow "free play." Dolls, several examples of which will be studied, belong to this latter category.

## [p. 203] 2. Adaptation and Education

Irrespective of their religious background, the makers and sellers of religious toys for children from various traditions share two strategies. The first is to adapt traditional toys or games, and the second is to put emphasis on the educative aspects of such toys.

Most religious toys are barely innovative but are adaptations of other toys. Among the best-known examples of games adapted to several religious and secular contexts are the multifaceted versions of the "snakes and ladders" (also known as "Chutes and Ladders") board game, originally from India. Such board games are easily adapted because they must be "played by the rules." The principal rules undergo no major changes, whereas the narrative of the game is transformed so as to correspond to the new cultural context.<sup>18</sup> In the case of a toy, the object will be adapted by giving it a distinctive cultural or religious "twist." for instance, alphabet blocks exist in many different cultural backgrounds, even if the script is not "alphabetical" in the strict sense. Latin alphabet blocks can be adapted to Hebrew or Arabic but also to scripts with even more letters, such as Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Tamil or Telugu.<sup>19</sup> In this case the number of blocks (and the price of the toy) will be greater. In the same way, a traditional building block set is adapted by adding pieces which reflect the particularities of Islamic architecture, as in the following product description:

The Masjid (Mosque) Building Block Set is a great addition to your child's toy collection. This one of a kind block set puts an Islamic twist on the classical building toy. Unique pieces such as domes, minarets, arches and arabesque patterns encourage kids to design and build the mosque of their

imagination. [...] Mix styles to create a structure distinctively your own.<sup>20</sup>

Traditional puzzles are adapted in the same way. Presenting Hinduism as "one of the world's most ancient and influential religions," the online shop of the Gnaana website sells the "Das Avatar Puzzle" featuring the different forms of the god Viṣṇu numbered from one to ten.

[p. 204] Figure 1 "Das Avatar Puzzle", taken from the website : <http://www.gnaana.com/images/uploads/dir/Avatar%201.jpg>



The "serious pedagogical function"<sup>21</sup> of toys is often emphasized in the product descriptions because their educative aspect is clearly a decisive selling factor of both regular and religious toys. The *Das Avatar Puzzle* is described as a "novel twist to a favorite learning tool-no barnyard animals or dinosaurs here!" Religion should matter more than zoology to parents conscious of transmitting religious knowledge to their children, but learning religious matters can be combined with learning other sciences: "your child will learn math along with mythology."<sup>22</sup> Like several other toys that teach something about religion to children who may not yet be able to read, an accompanying booklet is provided to narrate mythological episodes and to suggest different uses for the puzzle, with a blend of Montessori pedagogy.<sup>23</sup> Typically, the product descriptions of this Islamic building block set and of the *Das Avatar Puzzle* mainly target the parents who will buy the toy ("your child"), and not the children who will play with it.

Learning through toys must be fun, but also serious and efficient, especially when reading skills are concerned. Using alphabet blocks is only the first step toward knowledge, and in particular textual religious knowledge.

[p. 205] Figure 2 The "plush Torah," as sold through <http://www.jewishsoftware.com>.



In traditions that put emphasis on the reading of their sacred texts in a community setting or by individuals, children are encouraged to learn how to read so that they will be able to access these sacred scriptures at an early age. The sacred books of certain traditions have been turned into plush toys.

Plush Torah scrolls and Bibles<sup>24</sup> are designed for infants who cannot yet read, let alone know the letters of the script. In their real liturgical use, sacred books are shown particular respect and are not handled carelessly. On the other hand, plush sacred books will be hugged, thrown on the floor, or even bitten by toddlers. The existence of plush toy books raises the question of whether sacredness is attributed to the *text* or to the *book* itself as an object. No examples could be found of a plush Quran, perhaps because Islam focuses on recitation, rather than on personal or community reading of the book as an object. Nor is there a plush version of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred book of the Sikh tradition, which is usually treated with much care and reverence. The plush Torah scrolls look like real ones, but the sacred Tetragrammaton, the name of God, is slightly modified, as in the Torah scrolls used to practice reading skills, which are not treated as reverently as the Torah scrolls read in the synagogue. Other ritual objects can be made into toys so that children will be familiarized with them and develop an attachment to them (or to what they represent), [p. 206] such as *mini-puja* sets, which can be used by children. Different traditions attribute different degrees of sacredness to books or objects.

### 3. Imitation and Gender

Gender is an important factor in the construction of identity through playing with specific toys. Many toys are gender neutral, but many are adapted to either boys or girls even if the playing activity has *per se* no gender connotation.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as soon as children start role-playing games, sexual differentiation occurs. Boys and girls take on different roles and have toys that help stimulate their imagination and imitation of gendered models, including religious ones. Children imitate gestures, especially those related to the care of the body. Boys shave like Daddy and girls put make-up on like Mommy, and rarely the opposite. They also can imitate religious gestures, such as those made during rituals.

Pretend play toys are miniaturized objects of daily life.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, both boys and girls play to cook with kitchen sets, even though most advertisements and boxes of the kitchen sets feature only girls at play. Such kitchen sets exist in many cultures, such as a "Hindu Pure Veg Heritage of Green India" kitchen set, with metal utensils and a banana leaf as a plate.<sup>27</sup> Several games aimed at Jewish children teach them how to select and eat proper kosher food and particular ritual meals. Since, in the view supported by many different religions of a "traditional family," women are responsible for the selecting and cooking of food in the family, it is not surprising that such toys address girls more than boys. The way of selecting and preparing food in the prescribed ways must be learnt at an early age. The product descriptions of other playthings, such as religiously themed cookie cutters<sup>28</sup> also seem to address girls rather than boys.

[p. 207] Children also imitate religious gestures, such as those that are part of rituals, sometimes with the help of toys as accessories. The numerous links between toys and rituals or religious festivities cannot be developed here, but the obvious ritual aspect of gift wishing, giving and receiving must be underlined. Very often, ritual occasions are times of friends and family gathering, and festivals or holidays like Christmas, *Eid* or Hanukkah are traditional moments where the exchange of gifts takes place. Moreover, children must memorize the particularities of several rituals or religious feasts in which they take part. Available in different materials (plush, plastic, and wood), Jewish "Shabbat kits" or "Passover Seder kits" help remember the important elements of these festivities. Children play with them and learn about the rituals of their tradition. Likewise, the ten plagues of Egypt can be memorized with the help of finger puppets, but these could also be satirical objects<sup>29</sup> not really meant for children.

Open or restricted access to rituals for children gives rise to different strategies of using toys for religious training. When children have access

to rituals, they are encouraged to learn how to perform their ritual duties correctly at a very young age. This training is made more entertaining through religious toys but, again, these must promise (or prove) some pedagogical efficiency. For instance, the "My Mosque" interactive toy teaches

[...] about the various Islamic invocations required in various Muslim prayer positions. Your child can learn simply by pressing the buttons related to each Muslim prayer position and listening the audio [sic] of those invocations. Get your children or the children of your family and friends on their way to start learning *Salat/Prayer* today. Then it will become ingrained in them and they will take it very seriously but it will seem like a pleasure to them. Educational toy that teaches children ages 4 and up how to offer the prayer.<sup>30</sup>

In other cases, special clothing or accessories confer a special-and maybe playful-dimension to the moment of ritual prayer. The child-sized Fulla pink praying suit<sup>31</sup> encourages a girl to consider prayer as a special time.

[p. 208] Figure 3 The "My Mosque" toy



It allows the girl to imitate her doll and be thrilled to perform the prayer ritual.

Imitation is indeed a crucial aspect of playing, and in particular of playing dolls. In the interaction of girls with dolls and their accessories, imitation has several levels. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether the girl imitates the world of adults through her dolls, or if the dolls are imitations of real girls or women, or even if the girl imitates her doll as a model, whether moral, religious or even physical. In this last case, the doll is proposed as a role-model, which can also have a religious component. The girl can emulate the religious practices of her doll.

In some traditions, children cannot fully participate in or even attend some rituals as long as they have not been initiated. For instance, children

may not take the Catholic Eucharist before their First Communion (considered in this case as an initiatory rite). Furthermore, only a man ordained as a priest—that is, a ritual specialist—is allowed to celebrate the Eucharist. "Playing mass" or "playing priest"<sup>32</sup> seems to be a common game among Catholic children.<sup>33</sup> During this play, improvised items are commonly "transformed" by children. Over a kitchen towel serving as the altar's tablecloth, potato chips easily become the "Body of Christ." In commenting in a Catholic forum about this type of free pretend play, some users said that already a few decades ago, toy mass kits were being used in [p. 209] order to give rise to priestly vocations in little boys.<sup>34</sup> Recently, a new soft toy mass kit was released by the company WeeBelievers.<sup>35</sup> The effectiveness of such toys to really infuse the desire to become a priest is out of the scope of this research. Rather, the interesting issue is about gender and religion. Since there are no Roman Catholic female priests, are *girls* also supposed to play with this kind of toy?<sup>36</sup> The product description clearly states that "this innovative, educational and entertaining soft-sculpture toy is aimed at play for boys ages 3-12." Of course, there can be no control, and, in reviews about the mass kit, the use of this toy is even recommended to teach children, both boys and girls, about the mass (use by catechist).<sup>37</sup>

The question of the extent to which children are allowed or even encouraged to "play the rites" or to "narrate the sacred stories" with the help of religious toys is relevant in any religious context. Believers may wonder if such "playing of rites" does not debase their sacred character. Does playing the sacred narrative in a different way from the sacred text constitute a blasphemy? When playing with cartoon characters, children rarely stick to the scenario of the animated movie; hence it is very doubtful that, without adult supervision, they would stick to the original sacred narrative. Such questions can be answered only from an emic point of view, but these answers may allow the academic study of religions to better explain how each tradition considers ritual and ritual objects, their seriousness, their sacredness and, perhaps, their playfulness.

#### 4. Playing with Religious Dolls

This section on religious dolls covers how playing dolls is believed to affect girls in their spiritual and even physical development. In addition to the toy mass kit, WeeBelievers sells two "vocational dolls." The counterpart to the male figure of the priest named Juan Pablo is a huggable vocational doll named Sister Mary Clara.<sup>38</sup>

[p. 210] Figure 4 The two vocational dolls "Sister Mary Clara" and "Father Juan Pablo," from the website [www.weebelievers.com](http://www.weebelievers.com).



One of the intended aims of these dolls is to give rise to vocations. By playing with these dolls, a girl may want to become a nun and a boy a priest (and not a monk). The Sister Mary Clara doll has distinctive religious clothing and accessories (veil, dress, cross) and comes with a booklet. In the examples of the religious dolls (covered below), it is the bodies, outfits and accessories of the dolls that are given priority, not their very use as toys.

The category of doll comprises all sorts of humanoid figurines and includes super-hero action figures aimed at boys; in order to avoid gender stigma, these are not labeled as "dolls."<sup>39</sup> The action figures can also be religious "heroes," such as Ram, Jesus or Moses. Although most of these super-hero figures, whether religious or not, are human shaped, not all are. There are also monsters, aliens, or Hanuman the monkey-god. On the other hand, girls seem to play only with (mostly female) human-shaped dolls, even if some of their bodily proportions are sometimes scarcely human.<sup>40</sup> These dolls are also adapted to religious models. four different examples will highlight the religious and gendered aspects of playing doll.

[p. 211] Fulla is the best-known example of an "Islamic Barbie."<sup>41</sup> She was created

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as a role model for Muslim girls in 2003, by the company NewBoy based in Dubai. Despite its aim to be an alternative to Barbie and other dolls, it is very similar to the well-known original. Therefore, only the major differences between the two dolls will be underlined here.

Here is the description of Fulla on her official American website:

A girl's dream doll  
Fulla-the little girl that wears modest outfits, her top priorities are respect for herself and all around her and being kind to her friends and peers. We take pride promoting virtues to help girls be the very best today so they will grow up to the women who make a difference tomorrow.<sup>42</sup>

The first striking element is that she dresses "modestly."<sup>43</sup> Modesty and clothing are important issues for religious dolls of whichever tradition. In the case of Muslim dolls, their outfits aim to reflect cultural practices of clothing. Indeed, several sets of clothes are sold, some for in the home and some for outside. In the cartoon video clips of Fulla,<sup>44</sup> a clear distinction is made between a private space, inside of the home, and an outside space. At home, Fulla wears modest but fashionable clothing and has long luxurious hair. When going out to visit her exclusively female friends, she wears a black abaya and covers her hair. One of the implicit aims of having girls play with Fulla is that they learn early enough how and when it is appropriate to cover their bodies according to tradition.

While plenty of merchandising accessories for Fulla or Barbie are sold (backpack, sunglasses, etc.), another difference between them is that Fulla comes with explicitly religious accessories such as a prayer rug and prayer beads, for the doll and for the girl.<sup>45</sup>

[p. 212] The "American Girl" doll is not designed as a "religious doll"; nevertheless, it will be explored here briefly because it was adapted into Christian and Jewish dolls,<sup>46</sup> in a similar way as Barbie was adapted into Fulla. American Girl dolls were at the heart of several controversies implying ethics and discussions about religious values. The company's founders were accused by conservative Christian milieus of having an apparent "feminist (and humanist) agenda"<sup>47</sup> because they donated part of their profit to an association that supported the right to choose abortion.<sup>48</sup> This controversy, leading to a call to boycott them in 2005,<sup>49</sup> shows that consumer choice can be motivated by religious values. Booklets coming with the dolls encourage the girl's individuality rather than other values (such as being obedient and subservient), a characteristic that may not please all parents and children.

Different combinations of hairstyle or color, skin type or eye color allow for a great variety of potential American Girl dolls. Custom-made dolls can be ordered through the website or bought in stores (in North America). The

brand, now affiliated with Mattel, has been enjoying commercial success for several years. Even though American Girl is not explicitly religious or connected to any particular faith, its huge collection of dolls reflects ethnic and cultural diversity, and may include *some* religious references, although these are not at all emphasized. American Girl launched a historical collection featuring girls of different periods of American history and coming [p. 213] from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as the Amerindian "Kaya," or "Addy Walker," a girl trying to escape slavery in 1864. "Rebecca Rubin" is another doll of the historical collection:

a girl growing up in New York City in 1914, Rebecca celebrates treasured traditions passed down through her Russian-Jewish family.<sup>51</sup>

In her description, the emphasis is on family and cultural heritage rather than on actual religious practices and values.

A Jewish company has created their own dolls that are also characterized by modest outfits, the "Gali Girls." In the advertising video clip,<sup>52</sup> prominence is given to the imitative aspect and the concern to educate girls about Jewish values, identity, history, and holidays through accessories which come with the dolls.

Some toys can be considered as magically efficient objects that bring about transformative effects. Dolls are indeed attributed an influence on the girls who play with them. In the video clip promoting the Gali Girls dolls, the girl changes her clothing, hairstyle and even her high-heeled shoes once she starts playing with the Gali Girl instead of her "scantily clad dolls."

Gali Girls also has a "Jewish History Series." The description of the doll Miriam is the following:

Miriam Bloom is 10 years old and lives in a small shtetl (Village) called Grodek, in Russia, in the year 1914. Miriam's father left her family over a year ago to travel to America so that he could make enough money to bring Miriam and her family over in order to escape the dangerous life of the shtetl. The Bloom family encounter many challenges in their transition from the old life to the new, but Jewish community and Jewish values. [sic]

The American Girl Rebecca Rubin and the Gali Girl Miriam Bloom have much in common. Both Russian Jewish girls emigrate to New York in 1914. However, the religious aspect of the Gali Girl is clearly emphasized. It is hard to tell whether Gali Girl imitated the American Girl, or whether American Girl created a doll for Jewish girls (so as not to lose their share in the religious toy market) or whether both dolls were created simultaneously. All these dolls are actually quite similar in shape, size, and look, except for their distinctive clothing, accessories and accompanying booklets - all key elements that qualify them as "religious" dolls. Like the Fulla doll, the Gali Girls are sold with religious accessories such as a Shabbat playing kit and

[p. 214] Figure 5 Gali Girl doll "Miriam Bloom" and her Shabbat Kit, taken from www.galigirls.com.



matching Magen-David bracelets, for the doll and for its owner, so as to reinforce the imitative aspect.

Whereas the choice of American Girl dolls is very large, Gali Girls commercializes only ten dolls, but invites customers to stay informed of new product developments, such as "more ethnically diverse dolls, such as Sephardi or Ethiopian." In contrast, the company one2believe commercializes only three P31 dolls that appear as the Christian alternative or adaptation of the original American Girl doll. The *blessedtoys.com* website<sup>53</sup> provides the following product description:

Our P31 dolls were specifically designed to provide a Bible-based, Christian alternative to other secular toys on the market, and to encourage young girls to pursue biblical womanhood. [...] Each doll comes with an accessory kit, containing a Bible lesson (based on Proverbs 31:20), two cookie-cutters, a cookie recipe, and a list of exciting activities. This activity is sure to be tons of fun for any young girl! It is our prayer that the Lord would use these dolls as a means to encourage the girls of today to become Proverbs 31 women of tomorrow!

The doll was created in reference to a text describing the "perfect woman" according to biblical values. In an interview, David Socha, the founder of one2believe, said:

[p. 215]

[...] girls today are influenced by their surroundings, and when a girl spends a lot of time with a doll that looks like she belongs in a brothel [...] we have problems. In creating the P31 dolls, our goal is to give young girls positive, contemporary dolls that instill values that girls will carry with them their entire lives. P31 dolls are high quality, fashion forward and with the

included activity, fun to play with.<sup>54</sup>

Again, the imitative aspect is crucial here. Dolls are intended not only as physical models but also as role models in the sense that they should instill values in female children, who are supposed to grow into "perfect" women both as far as their spiritual dispositions and their physical appearance are concerned.

These adaptations of traditional dolls and toys raise the question of values. Makers and buyers of explicitly religious toys provide objects to educators who seek to instill or transmit values to the real users of the toys, the children.<sup>55</sup> It is clear that the femininity supported by these religious dolls contrasts sharply with that of the regular originals, like Barbie. The insistence on the modest clothing of the dolls is a corollary of the belief that the girl will grow up to resemble the doll she plays with physically, or that she already resembles it. Playing with the "right kind of doll" can transform not only the personality but also the appearance of the developing female body of the girl. It is interesting to highlight that there is no such issue with boys growing up to resemble the action figures they play with, whether deformed horrendous monsters or violent muscular warriors. The construction of gender in all of the religious dolls examined here insists particularly on values deemed feminine. A journalistic review on the P31 dolls clearly states the issue from an emic perspective:

[p. 216]

Compassionate, charitable, tastefully dressed, physically fit, and caring are traits we all want our children to grow up possessing. However with all the negative images and damaging messages our society bombards our children with, you may be wondering how it can be done?<sup>56</sup>

The Gali Girl dolls are explicitly said to carry certain values:

Gali Girl values represent kindness, respect, and honesty, to name a few. Gali Girl accessories create a connection between the contemporary Jewish girl and her heritage. Thus our motto: "Learn and play the Jewish way."<sup>57</sup>

Modesty, honesty, care for others and respect for themselves (and their bodies), and for parents and peers are the values wished for in a girl and in the perfect religious woman that she is supposed to grow up to be, especially as a wife and mother.

In contrast, regular brands simply insist on play during childhood and on the fun that the girl can have with her doll. For instance:

At American Girl, we celebrate girls and all that they can be. That's why we develop products and experiences that help girls grow up in a wholesome way, while encouraging them to enjoy girlhood through fun and enchanting play.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The three concepts of adaptation, education and imitation help understand the significance of toys as cultural objects expressing values, and not only as playthings for children. In discourses about religious toys,

gender also stands out as an important element in constructing a religious identity. Product descriptions often explicitly refer to religious values, most of which address the adults as parents who buy the toys, and not the children who play with them. The generalized lack of interest in what children themselves say of their toys and of their religions may stem not only from scholarly disinterest but also from the difficulty that researchers face when trying to access or observe the real use of these religious toys by children.<sup>59</sup> Hence this investigation focused on discourses about and [p. 217] representations of religious toys. Indeed, the explanations provided with the toys (booklets, product descriptions, statements on the websites of the retailers, reviews) make their "religious" character obvious to all parties,<sup>60</sup> except perhaps to the young children who play with them. Parents know about religiously or culturally adapted games, but their children may only be familiar with their religious versions.

Religious toys are designed and bought by adults for children<sup>61</sup> for the purpose of teaching them moral values, and in order to transmit to them basic knowledge of their own tradition,<sup>62</sup> thus participating in the construction of a specifically religious or cultural identity. In this respect, the educative function of religious toys is similar to that of regular ones. The strong educational aspect of these toys does not dismiss their entertaining role. Whatever the degree of pedagogical efficiency and conformity to religious values promised to the buyers, learning serious things-such as moral values, ritual performance and sacred narratives-is made more fun and enjoyable by the use of toys.

Religious toys cannot be considered as innovative, at least not in their shape and intended use, since most are based on an existing regular toy. Indeed, adaptation is one of the striking aspects of religious toys. Toy makers share the same strategy of adapting existing games, toys and dolls by giving them a "religious aspect," whichever tradition they belong to. This is done by using symbols, adding accessories, or simply by accompanying the toys with an explanatory booklet and a good deal of marketing, as is the case for the religious dolls fulla, Gali Girls and P31.

[p. 218] Adaptations are also applied to ritual objects turned into toys. Some traditions consider that real ritual objects cannot be handled by children and thus toy ritual objects are proposed so that children can become familiar with them and learn their appropriate use. In other cases, an attitude of great reverence for ritual objects, books or sacred figures prevents them from being turned into toys. Each tradition defines for itself the sacredness of its ritual accessories and sacred books. There are plenty of Shabbat sets-but the "toy mass kit" is contested; there are plush Torah scrolls-but

no plush Guru Granth Sahib. There are plush Krishnas and dolls of Jesus and "Amma the hugging saint"<sup>63</sup> - but no plush figures of the Muslim Prophet, while a great variety of other Islamic toys are sold.

Gender is a crucial element in the construction of identity in general. The potency attributed to certain toys in the construction of a religious identity is striking. Toys like religious dolls put a strong emphasis on values which are deemed feminine, such as modesty, respect and care for oneself and for others, patience, and faith in God. The way dolls are considered as representations of the human female body calls into question gendered role models proposed to girls. The use of dolls in itself is not held as controversial by most religious traditions. The real issue is rather the clothing and accessories of the dolls because of the influence they are believed to have on girls. Since the female body is a site of expression of religious values, this body, even in its representation in the shape of a doll, is controlled. In the case of religious dolls, a transformative power is attributed to an object, which can have a negative or positive influence not only on the mind but also on the developing female body of the girl who plays with it.

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**Notes** (As footnotes in the original publication)

- 1 Caillois 2001: Man, Play, and Games, 9.
- 2 Caillois 2001: Man, Play, and Games, 62.
- 3 Bado-Fralick / Sachs Norris 2010: Toying with God, 14. Brougère also pinpoints this paradox in a review about one of the rare sociological studies in French about toys: “Les recherches et les ouvrages concernant le jouet sont rares, paradoxe pour un objet très fortement présent dans la vie de l'enfant, qui s'affiche ostensiblement dans les médias, la rue, et à domicile, à l'occasion des fêtes de fin d'année. En revanche, il semble avoir quelques difficultés à s'afficher comme un objet légitime de recherche” (Brougère 2002, Le jouet et ses usages sociaux (review): 145). This is even more so in the field of the study of religions. An innovative and original study by Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris, Toying with God. The World of Religious Games and Dolls, was published shortly before the presentation of this contribution at the Homo Ludens. Play, Culture and Religion symposium. Toying with God discusses examples mainly from contemporary Christianity, Judaism and, to a lesser extent, Islam. While it is true that examples of Buddhist and Hindu games or toys are harder to find, the present contribution tries not to take contemporary Christianities as the sole and main point of comparison and includes examples which do not appear in Toying with God, even though some of the toys such as Fulla and the P31 dolls are also mentioned in it (see the detailed review of this book by Pasche Guignard 2011).
- 4 Hirschfeld explains that in the field of anthropology, “resistance to child-focused scholarship [...] is a byproduct of (1) an impoverished view of cultural learning that overestimates the role adults play and underestimates the contribution that children make to cultural reproduction, and (2) a lack of appreciation of the scope and force of children's culture, particularly in shaping adult culture.” (Hirschfeld 2002: Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?, 611). In the case of religious toys, it is also a problem of access. While it is possible to collect such toys, as did the authors of Toying with God (Bado-Fralick & Sachs Norris 2010: Toying with God, x), it is much more difficult to access children playing with religious toys. They most probably will not play exclusively with religious toys but such items may be found among many other playthings.
- 5 Sutton Smith 1986
- 6 The original Barbie doll is still banned in Saudi Arabia. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, traditional games such as flying kites were forbidden.
- 7 Golay 2006: Et si on jouait à la poupée..., 85-102.
- 8 From the perspective of both toy makers and buyers, religious toys are defined as “religious” in opposition to the vast majority of regular toys, and not the opposite. We resist the urge to call common toys “secular” since they are usually not defined in opposition to religion. “Regular” is more appropriate and neutral than “secular” to describe common toys which are not “religious”.
- 9 The category of “educators” includes parents, but also other members of the extended family, school teachers and other persons in charge of the religious education of children. According to Brougère, toys are “a system of meanings and practices, produced by those who distribute them as well by those who use them, whether by giving or playing” (Brougère 2003: Jouets et compagnie, 11, my translation). The three types of actors involved will be considered here: the

- toy industry (toys makers and sellers), the buyers (educators) and the recipients of the toys.
- 10 According to the founder of a company which sells toys and educational material about Hinduism through their website ([www.gnaana.com](http://www.gnaana.com), 01.10.2010), several interconnecting factors can explain this lack of Hindu toys: (1) in India, learning about Hinduism is not considered a priority for students who must focus on other subjects (e. g. sciences or languages) in order to compete and be employed; (2) mostly in the West, there may be a certain “stigma” attached to being “very Hindu”; (3) the great diversity of regional and familial variations in actual practice and beliefs; (4) “Hinduism” (understood as a generic term encompassing many different traditions originating from the Indian sub-continent) is sometimes dismissed as too complicated to explain to children because many parents or adults have difficulty in synthesizing its major principles for their children (personal communication with Mrs Aruna Hatti, 10.01.2011).
  - 11 An Indian example could be the Gujjana Goollu, see Ute Husken's paper "Training, Play, and Blurred Distinctions: On Imitation and 'Real' Ritual" in this volume, above p.188-191.
  - 12 For instance, the “Sister Mary Clara huggable vocational doll” is “certified quiet” and is thus “appropriate for use in reverent and low noise environments. There is no noisy Velcro, loud snaps, or crackling paper”. <http://weebelievers.com/product/vocation-doll-sr-mary-clara> (10.09.2010). The noise of children playing should not disturb other on-going activities, like rituals. More evident examples may include rattles played during the Jewish festival of Purim or the Nativity set used only just before and shortly after Christmas time.
  - 13 As noted in a sociological study on toys in the construction of childhood, toys are supposed to “disappear” when children grow older since they belong specifically to the world of childhood (Vincent 2001: Le jouet dans la construction sociale de l'enfance, 5). In French, the distinction in the vocabulary between “jeu” et “jouet” is striking: adults do not have toys (jouets) even though they play games (jeux). Children may have both.
  - 14 See Bado-Fralick / Sachs Norris 2010, 69-106 for a chapter that highlights the links between money, commerce, consumerism, marketing, religion and politics in the context of the USA (“Holy Commerce, Batman!”). The affinity between business and religion, in particular Protestantism, needs not be developed here. Recent studies provide documented data and statistics about the toy market (Vandercammen / Meirsmann 2004: Le marché du jouet) and journalistic accounts about the toy industry give an overall view of the whole process of toy designing, making, marketing and selling.
  - 15 Access to such religious toys is not as easy in Europe as it may be in the USA where some religious toys (mostly Christian) are sold even in regular toy stores, such as Toys'R'Us.
  - 16 This part of the investigation only led to the conclusion that religious toys are uncommon or even unheard of in regular toy shops in Switzerland, and probably in Europe in general. One of the best known toy retailers, Toys'R'Us, has different websites for Europe (e.g. [www.toysrus.fr](http://www.toysrus.fr), 23.02.2011) and for the USA ([www.toysrus.com](http://www.toysrus.com), 23.02.2011). A keyword search for religious items yielded several results on the American site whereas the French yielded no results.
  - 17 The closest English equivalent to the French word “ludothèque” is “toy library”. For a study of “ludothèques” in the European context, see Roucoux / Brougère 1998: Loisir et éducation. Borrowing toys rather than buying them corresponds to a practice of “collaborative consumption” (Bostman & Rogers 2010: What's Mine Is Yours. The Rise of Collaborative Consumption, 105) which may sometimes be motivated by ethical reasons grounded in religious beliefs. Some toy libraries have a religious affiliation, but this does not mean that all toys available for borrowing are religious. See for example: <http://www.sonshinetoylibrary.com.au/> - or: [http://www.carisharingey.org.uk/toy\\_library.htm](http://www.carisharingey.org.uk/toy_library.htm) (02.12.2010). Most examples of Christian toy libraries, which are run by churches, are to be found in English-speaking countries.
  - 18 See Jens Schlieter's contribution in this volume, Simulating Salvation: The Tibetan Buddhist Game “Ascending the [Spiritual] Levels”, above, p. 97-98.
  - 19 Alphabet blocks in these languages are sold for instant through the website of Gnaana,

addressing mostly Indian in the USA and selling their products through the Internet: [www.gnaana.com](http://www.gnaana.com) (01.10.2010).

20 Product description of the Masjid Building Block Set, sold for instance at: [http://www.hamzahonline.com/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&products\\_id=94](http://www.hamzahonline.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=94) (02.12.2010).

21 Bado-Fralick / Sachs Norris 2010, 15.

22 <http://www.gnaana.com/shop.php?op=productdetail&productid=195&parent=76#> (17.02.2011).

23 Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the Italian physician and educationalist developed a pedagogy recommending the use of specific toys for learning particular skills.

24 <http://www.arksupplies.com.au/products/Baby%27s-First-Bible-and-Cross-Plush-Set-%252d-Pink.html> (17.02.2011).

25 The on-going photography project of Jeong Mee Yoon is a striking visual example of how specific colors are attributed to girls and boys. Since 2005, she has been documenting children from different cultural backgrounds in their room with all their toys (and other items): pink is for girls and blue is for boys. [http://jeongmeeyoon.com/aw\\_pinkblue.htm](http://jeongmeeyoon.com/aw_pinkblue.htm) (01.10.2010).

26 See Caillois 2001: Man, Play, and Games, 21, quoted at the beginning of this contribution, p. 197.

27 A picture and description of this example was found on a blog by a mother residing in Chennai, India. The original maker of the toy could not be found. <http://arundathi-rediscovery.blogspot.com/2008/01/kosher-toys.html> (01.10.2010).

28 Cookie cutters are some of the accessories which come with the Christian P31 dolls, see below. Religiously themed cookie cutters were found for Christmas, Easter, Hanukah, Purim, and Eid, all festivals of monotheistic traditions.

29 Bado-Fralick / Sachs Norris 2010: Toying with God, 9-11.

30 The description was retrieved from:

<http://www.muslimtoysanddolls.com/?p=productsMore&iProduct=492&sName=childrens-my-mosque-islamic-gift> (01.10.2010), where this toy is sold.

31 Like that sold as an accessory to the Fulla doll, see below, p. x.

32 Several aspects of the question of “playing priest” in a Hindu context are developed in Ute Hüsken’s contribution (see p. X), which is an interesting basis for further comparison about imitation of ritual gendered models. The major difference seems to be that not all boys who play priest will become catholic priests.

33 They also imitate other rituals, as Caillois noted (Caillois 2001: Man, Play, and Games, 62).

34 <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=200943> (10.09.2010).

35 <http://weebelievers.com> (10.09.2010).

36 <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=2561> (10.09.2010).

37 <http://www.archindy.org/Criterion/local/2009/04-24/masskit.html> (10.09.2010)

38 <http://weebelievers.com/product/vocation-doll-sr-mary-clara> (10.09.2010) and

<http://weebelievers.com/product/vocation-doll-fr-juan-pablo> (10.09.2010).

39 Bado-Fralick / Sachs Norris 2010: Toying with God, 48.

40 Caillois underlined that the toys of girls “are designed to imitate practical, realistic, and domestic activities” (Caillois 2001: Man, Play, and Games, 180).

41 The example of Fulla was the easiest to document since, contrary to other dolls which emulate Barbie in a Muslim way, she is popular across the globe and not only in English-speaking countries. Furthermore, Fulla has a well documented website, which exists in both English and Arabic versions, the latter being more complete.

42 <http://www.fulla.us> (10.09.2010).

43 Fulla is sold on websites such as The Hijab World, whose motto is “Modern but modest”: <http://www.thehijabworld.com/4-49-270-muslim-dolls-fulla-desi-zahrah-faceless.aspx>

(10.09.2010).

44 Many such videos can be retrieved from video sharing websites such as YouTube. Some videos are the official cartoons while others are parodies of Fulla and other dolls of the Barbie-type.

45 The official version of Barbie does not propose this type of product to its consumers. There have been many pastiche and satirical versions of the official Barbie by Mattel. Official adaptations of Barbie exist in many cultural versions (such as the “Reflections of India” Series featuring Punjabi Barbies) but no explicitly religious Barbie has been made by Mattel and the many accessories designed for girls do not include prayer beads and prayer rugs.

46 American Girl was first designed to be an alternative to Barbie. Other dolls of this type, featuring a seemingly real girl rather than an inaccessible woman, do exist. Barbie thus has both religious (Fulla, Razanne) and regular alternatives.

47 <http://theworldfrommywindow.blogspot.com/2007/01/p31-dolls-american-girl-gets-proverbs.html> (10.09.2010).

48 This organization, called Girls Incorporated, helps underprivileged girls. In addition to supporting the right to chose abortion, it also promotes acceptance of homosexuality. This controversy took place in the context of the debate between the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” movements, which is quite virulent in the USA. In this context, critical issues are addressed surrounding the female body, its representations, sexual ethics and puritanism.

49 <http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=33184> (02.12.2010).

50 These dolls even appear in the article on American Girl dolls in Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Girl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Girl) (10.09.2010).

51 <http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/static/rebeccadoll.jsp> (10.09.2010).

52 This video clip can be found on their website and on :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzBPBlHzCmc> (01.11.2010).

53 <http://www.blessedtoys.com/members/~username~/p31.htm> (01.11.2010). These dolls are sold through various other websites. The verse quoted in reference (Proverbs 31:20) is: “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy”.

54 <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/281032011.html> (14.10.2010).

55 Some parents manifest their strong disagreement with certain features of current society by forbidding their children to play with specific kinds of toys (like toy-guns, games featuring violence or dolls which are deemed to be too sexualized). The question of to which extent parents may forbid toys in the name of religious or moral values cannot be treated here. New issues about parenting and education are at stake. For example, would vegan parents forbid the animal farming set or the non-veg kitchen set? Would a toy train be preferred to a toy car for an ecological upbringing? Would a feminist mother avoid giving her daughter the toy cleaning set or the toy kitchen set so as not inculcate her traditional representations of gender roles? In practice, it is very difficult to forbid such toys in this way because - if not at home - children will find all these regular toys at school, day-care centers, or at their friends’ houses.

56 <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/281032011.html> (14.10.2010).

57 [http://www.galigirls.com/about\\_us.php](http://www.galigirls.com/about_us.php) (01.11.2010).

58 Emphasis is mine. <http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=1> (10.09.2010).

59 See above, p. 199, fn 4. Observing children play with religious toys outside of adult supervision was outside the scope of this research.

60 Toy designers and retailers clearly label them as “religious”, however, it is not absolutely certain that the buyers consider them as such or only as such.

61 Children can have a great influence in deciding which products are bought. Many TV advertisements directly target children. Religious toys sold through the Internet tend to address the parents, as the product description often refers to “your child”, and does not speak to the

children directly. This question of the children's uses of religious toys deserves further study because it could shed light on how such toys are perceived and if their purpose in transmitting values is effective on individual and multiple users. Group dynamics may change the perception and use of religious toys.

62 Religious toys rarely aim at educating children about the diversity of religions in the world. When this is the case, such material, mostly board games, are conceived more as a pedagogical tool to be used in a group setting than as a toy for individual use.

63 <http://yhst-48623381281812.stores.yahoo.net/dlm.html> (02.12.2010). The dolls are described as follows: "Handmade with many items used or blessed by Amma and ornamented with many beads, each of these adorable creations wears a white dress and a sari in the original style of Amma's clothing. [...] You might say each is a work of art, but more than that they are a work of love- Amma's love". Here, the focus is the female body of this woman, considered a saint by her devotees. Touching the doll is like touching the religious figure who hugs her devotees. She has touched, blessed or even worn the materials used to make the dolls.