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Lego religion in the classroom.

The potential use of children's popular culture in the teaching of religion in kindergarten and primary school

Sissel Undheim

By looking at some of the references to religion and to “religious vocabulary” in three Lego toy worlds, this article discusses how children's popular culture may be seen not only as obstacles but even more so as resources for teaching and learning about religious diversity. Expanding from the specific case of “Lego religion”, the article will conclude by outlining both challenges and possibilities that the combination of religion and children's popular culture brings to the field of didactics of religion.

Indem einige Bezüge zu Religion und „religiösem Vokabular“ in drei Lego-Spielwelten angeschaut werden, diskutiert dieser Artikel wie die Populärkultur der Kinder im Religionskundeunterricht als Hindernis aber auch als Ressource für den Unterricht zu religiöser Diversität gesehen werden kann. Ausgehend vom spezifischen Fall der „Lego-Religion“ reflektiert dieser Beitrag Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten, welche die Kombination von Religion und der Populärkultur der Kinder für das Feld der Religionskundedidaktik bringt.

A partir de quelques références à la religion et au « vocabulaire religieux » dans trois univers de jouets de Lego, cet article discute de la façon dont la culture populaire des enfants peut être considérée comme un obstacle mais aussi comme une ressource dans le cadre d'un enseignement sur la diversité des religions. Prenant appui sur le cas particulier de la « religion Lego », cet article souligne les défis et les possibilités que représente la combinaison entre religion et culture populaire dans le champ de la didactique des religions.

1 Introduction

In this article, I will discuss the use of children's popular culture in integrative religious education as a potential means of engaging students and in taking a student-centered perspective.¹ Most available research on popular culture and education focuses on university or college education (e.g., Troop, 2004; Reuber, 2011; Ford, 2012). When it comes to religious education for younger students, some studies have explored the potential and actual use of popular culture in more confessional contexts (cf. Cheung, 2003; Hess, 2004; Berglund, 2008; Johnsen, 2014), and various educational pop-cultural resources have been developed for this particular purpose (Cheung, 2003; Warren, 2005). This article, in contrast, will look at popular culture as a potential resource in integrative religious education (RE) for the younger students in kindergarten and primary school.

The term “integrative” RE has been developed by Wanda Alberts (2007) as a means to describe a kind of RE that aims at including all pupils regardless of any personal or parental religious affiliation. This kind of education is contrasted with the model Alberts calls “separative religious education”, where children are educated in and according to the religious tradition of their parents' choice. Although separative RE is still the dominant model for RE in Europe, some countries, like Norway and Sweden, have tried out various models of integrative RE, based, at least ideally, on the outsider perspectives from the scientific study of religion. As specified in the Norwegian Education Act of 1998 (2014), “Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics is an ordinary school subject that shall normally be attended by all pupils. Teaching in the subject shall not involve preaching.” The act further underlines that the various religions and belief systems shall be taught in an “objective, critical and pluralistic manner” and according to “the same educational principles” (Norwegian Education Act of 1998, 2014, section 2.4; cf. Andreassen, 2013; Skeie,

¹ The overall argument and main theoretical perspectives here are mainly the same as those discussed in Undheim, although the age group and the pop cultural material I discuss in this article are different.

2016). The act's aim is thus for pupils to learn about religion as it is represented in contemporary society in its very variety and plurality.² And with such a challenging task, where is it better to start than in the children's immediate surroundings, that is, in their toy boxes?

2 Popular culture, religion and “spiritualities”

As new media and means of diffusion allow for new expressions and interpretations to be communicated at increased speed, religion is also to be found in new and perhaps “unexpected places” (Forbes, 2005). Recent studies that also focus on the various interrelations between religion, media and popular culture demonstrate how media is both a mirror of contemporary religiosity and at the same time an agent of religious change (Clark, 2003; Hjarvard, 2008; 2011; Endsjø & Lied, 2011). Although a number of studies on religion and popular culture have appeared in recent decades, children's popular culture has so far received attention, apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Sky 2003; Warren 2005; Bado-Fralick & Norris 2010; Endsjø & Lied 2011). There is no doubt that this is an area of vast potential, and my example of “Lego religion” is thus only one of many possible resources for teachers who wish to take this approach.

Another significant reason for teachers to look closer at children's popular culture for teaching resources is the critique of the so-called World Religion Paradigm, or WRP (Masuzawa, 2005; Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013; Cotter & Robertson, 2016). The organization of religion into five (or sometimes more) “world religions” not only highlights the legacy of a dominant Christian, and mainly Lutheran, understanding of religion, but also tends to present the religious traditions in question as more or less self-contained boxes. The result is not only that plurality, tensions and dynamics within these traditions are masked, but that the very variety of religious conceptions and expressions that fall outside of the World Religions template is rendered invisible. Although the critique against the WRP has mainly been directed at Higher Education studies and textbooks, the challenges that arise from the fact that this model is still the dominant approach in children's RE have also been highlighted (Owen, 2011; Undheim, 2013; Anker, 2017). One way of working against the limitations of the WRP is thus, I argue, to look at the pupils' immediate cultural surroundings for inspiration to work with concepts, religious plurality and material religious expressions in the RE classroom, topics that often are challenging even for older students.

Although not “religion” as confined by the World Religion Paradigm that frames Norwegian RE, it is evident that the religiosity, or “spirituality”, sprinkled on Lego's products nevertheless mediates terminology and conceptualizations that can facilitate learning in RE. As Ingvild Gilhus and Steven Sutcliffe (2013) have argued, New Age spiritualities are “good to think with” since they shed new light upon how we may understand and study religion. Gilhus and Sutcliffe contend that by replacing a World Religion prototype of religion with “New Age spirituality”, we will get a better understanding of the dynamics of contemporary everyday – , or “lived”, religion. With a spatial model that develops Jonathan Smith's (2004) categories of here, there and anywhere, Gilhus adds “everywhere” as the fourth category that is typical for many forms of contemporary religion, disseminated, among other means, by popular media (Gilhus, 2013, 2014a; cf. Gilhus & Mikaelsson, 2000). As New Age spiritualities thus are to be found “everywhere” and “spread thinly”, according to Gilhus, this should be no less true for children, to whom the “magic” of popular culture is indeed everywhere (Gilhus, 2013; cf. Pinsky, 2004; Endsjø & Lied, 2011; Undheim, 2018). Linda Woodhead has in a recent article argued that, as old classifications are breaking down, a new intensified kind of pluralism emerges, one that she calls “a pluralism of religious de-differentiation and deregulation.” According to Woodhead, “religious ideas and symbols float free on a scale never seen before, becoming available to any ‘seeker’” (2016, p. 44). Not unlike Gilhus' description of “religion everywhere”, Woodhead argues that “religion has leaked into areas of life from which it was temporarily exiled by modern projects” (p. 46) and that, as part of the de-differentiation, the distinction between religious and secular becomes meaningless. Although what we encounter in the multimedia Lego products discussed in this article obviously would be more in line with what many would term “spiritual, but not religious”, I have, in line with Woodhead and Gilhus, chosen to not necessarily distinguish the two, but refer to all as representations or expressions of religion.

Taking these observations of Gilhus and Woodhead seriously, along with the aims of Religion Education to teach in an “objective, critical and pluralistic manner”, would also mean that examples from the plurality of cultural rep-

² Despite the global reach of Lego's products, this article will focus on the Norwegian RE context. This is not due to the limitation of the Lego products but to the challenges of comparing and transferring RE between and among different countries (cf. Bråten, 2010, 2015). The integration of Lego in RE will thus depend on so many different significant didactic factors in each situation that it will be outside the scope of this article to discuss them.

representations of religion already familiar to the pupils are identified and incorporated into their RE.³ This does by no means imply that teachers are to “explain” to the pupils that their toys are “religious”, or that the toys should be used in a quest for deeper meaning or truth, or to strengthen and confirm children’s religious identity. Rather, because of the fact that these representations will already be familiar to so many of these children, I see principally two ways this (may) impact on RE teaching. First of all, the teacher may include vocabulary, visualizations and other kinds of representations from these transmedia toys in a planned teaching session, with the aim of discussing certain concepts that are central in RE. The main part of this article addresses this aspect of Lego religion in the classroom. Equally important, however, and inextricably tied to this point, is the fact that knowledge of how religion is mediated in popular culture aimed at children also helps teachers understand the pupil’s own preconceptions and may avoid misunderstandings and miscommunication in learning situations where pupils may refer to these concepts. I will move on to some examples to illustrate this point.

3 Lego and religion

3.1 Dimensions, *chi*, ninjas and elves

The focus of this article will be some samples of religious references in the transmedia narratives developed around the three Lego product lines Elves, Ninjago and Legends of Chima. While Ninjago and Legends of Chima are mainly targeted at boys aged 5–14, Elves is more specifically aimed at girls of the same age group. In addition to the brick sets, the supersystems are built around webpages, animated TV series (available on children’s channels, YouTube and DVD), online and computer games, books, comic magazines and a number of other new and traditional media. According to Marsha Kinder, in order to be a supersystem, a

[media] network must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures, who in turn are targeted with diverse strategies; must foster “collectability” through a proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which becomes a “media event” that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system’s commercial success. (Kinder, 1991, p. 123)

With Lego’s game Dimensions, Lego’s supersystem(s) have reached a new level, with cross-branding that incorporates characters from Harry Potter, The Lord of the Ring and the Simpsons as well as Lego Chima and Ninjago:

The LEGO® Ninjago™ Masters of Spinjitsu fighting alongside Wonder Woman™...yes, please! Get ready to break the rules, because the only rule with LEGO® Dimensions™ is that there are no rules.⁴

Combining bricks, video games and visuals familiar from movies as well as Lego’s own animated movies and TV series, the game combines playfulness, rule breaking and fun with a number of different fantasy universes at once (Undheim, 2017).⁵ Many of these fictional worlds featured in Lego Dimensions have also caught the interest of many religion scholars, such as Star Wars (Possamai, 2012), The Lord of the Ring (Davidsen, 2012) and Harry Potter (Feldt, 2016a, 2016b; cf. also Cusack, 2010, 2016; Undheim, 2016). The Lego universe with its many different “realms” is thus one that abounds with more or less explicit references to religion and “spirituality”, in line with finds in a number of studies of contemporary religion. While Lego Ninjago centers on recurring apocalyptic scenarios in demand of a heroic group of super-ninjas and their master, Sensei Wu, Legends of Chima is populated by animal tribes fighting equally apocalyptic battles over *chi*, their “most sacred resource” (Undheim, 2017).

In Elves, the human character Emily is described as follows:

As a human being, Emily looks like the odd one out in the company of elves. But somehow she fits right in. She is getting more and more familiar with the magic that is surrounding her. She has a very special bond with Elandra, the Queen Dragon.⁶

3 Bengt-Ove Andreassen and Torjer A. Olsen have taken New Age spirituality into consideration in their discussion of children and religion in Norwegian kindergartens. Their perspective, however, is more on the staff’s knowledge and relation to parents with New Age affiliations than on the children’s learning (2014, pp. 188–99).

4 “How to Play”, retrieved from <https://www.lego.com/en-gb/dimensions/how-to-play>

5 Although not discussed specifically in this article, it should be noted that education is one of Lego’s many priority areas. They have their own web pages dedicated to education and have recently funded a professorate of play, development and learning at the University of Cambridge (Ferguson, 2017).

6 “Emily Jones”, retrieved from <https://www.lego.com/en-gb/elves?ignorereferer=true>

The brick set called “The Dragon Sanctuary” (see Figure 1) may serve as an example of the kind of terminology and references that these Lego products represent. The term “sanctuary”, with a photo or even an actual brick set if the kindergarten/school has one, can in this case work as the starting point for conversations about sanctuaries, dragons and elves. Older pupils might also want to discuss why many find dragons and elves so fascinating and why Lego has chosen to call the box set a sanctuary.



Figure 1. Elves: The Dragon Sanctuary. Brick set.

The chorus of the Elves theme song states that “magic is here, if you dare to believe”. There is a clear echo of Disney’s slogan “Movies, magic and more”⁷ and of the fusion of Lego and a fantasy universe inspired by Tolkien and contemporary cultural fascination with elves, angels and other beautiful intermediate beings (cf. Sky, 2003; Davidsen, 2012; Gilhus, 2014b). Likewise, the fantasy “realms” of Chima and Ninjago are scattered with symbols, narratives and references that are easily identified as religious, such as rituals, sacred objects, narratives and miracles.⁸ I have elsewhere argued that these transmedia supersystems may be seen as not only reflecting but also contributing to ongoing religious change (Undheim, 2016, 2017a, 2018). In this article, however, I will focus on them as representations of contemporary religion, and as such, as relevant material for teachers to integrate in the RE classes. Some of these relevant references and representations will be more thoroughly discussed in the following. Before that, however, we need to look a little closer at some of the theories that allow us to identify religion in these Lego supersystems in the first place.

3.2 “Monasteries then and now”

My own initial encounter with the religious vocabulary of Lego’s products, and the didactic potential of them, was when I encountered an eager band of five-year-olds at play, all hurrying back to their “monastery” (Undheim, 2016). Knowing that monasteries are rare in predominantly Lutheran Norway, what sparked my interest was how these five-year-olds had even come to learn such a word, and in what context they used it. It was then a surprise to learn that, far from playing Catholic, or even Orthodox Christian monks, which would have been my own primary point of reference, these children were Lego ninjas, returning to their sacred retreat and training camp, namely a monastery (Figure 2).

⁷ The relationship between religion and magic is a long one in the history of religions. I will not enter that discussion here, but merely underline that most contemporary scholars consider the distinction between “religion” and “magic” to be very artificial from a religious studies point of view, cf. Benavides (2006) and Feldt (2016a, 2016b).

⁸ See also Weiss (2014), who suggests that a number of religious themes underlie the blockbuster *Lego Movie*, spanning from details such as names to allegories. Also, there is the Hollywood message that “all you need to be special is to believe”, as well as the theme song from DreamWorks’ *The Prince of Egypt*, with the chorus affirming that “there will be miracles, when you believe” (cf. Endsjø & Lied, 2011).



Figure 2. Ninjago: Monastery of Spinjitzu, depicted at sunrise

No doubt a visual hyperbole of exoticisms and stereotypes, this was still recognizable as a Buddhist-inspired temple and most likely the first representation of a temple that these children had encountered. The enthusiasm with which the children embraced this new world Lego had opened up compelled them to apply this new vocabulary and make it a natural part of their ever-expanding knowledge. This episode serves as a reminder of what many kindergarten and primary school teachers are of course already aware of, namely, how children come to school and kindergarten with a rich vocabulary of religious terms and concepts that they initially learn from their toys and from using different age-specific media (Endsjø & Lied, 2011). It may also be a reminder of how still prominent conceptions of “religion”, mainly based on Christian theology, provide too narrow understandings and frames for all the varieties of religion that we find entangled in society and culture, and which in turn represent the religion encountered by our pupils. I will therefore argue that an approach that takes the (not unproblematic) “common ground” of children’s popular culture as a starting point may bring enthusiasm and fun back into a very tricky subject while at the same time keeping a “learning about” and not “learning from” approach to religion. It is also a means of making religious pluralism more tangible and comprehensible to children.

3.3 Teaching temples and phoenixes

While the Elves series has sanctuaries (Figure 1), Chima and Ninjago have temples. Much of the action in the engaging narratives that unfold on the transmedia platforms of Lego is centered on these temples (cf. Figure 2), and there are also building sets where the children construct them in Lego blocks according to the manuals. These are therefore very material points of reference. The main temples in Legends of Chima are the Lion Temple of Chi and the Flying Phoenix Temple (Figure 3). Ninjago, which currently has run six seasons, has featured a number of temples since the series was launched in 2013. Among these are the Fire Temple, the Temple of Light, the Temple of Airjitsu and the Temple of Resurrection (Figure 4; for further descriptions of some of these temples, see Undheim, 2016).



Figure 3. Legends of Chima: Flying Phoenix Fire Temple. Brick set.



Figure 4. Ninjago: Temple of Airjitzu. Brick sets.

In working with categories and concepts related to and describing aspects of religion, it is therefore helpful for teachers to know that these concepts are in fact familiar to many pupils. A very open approach would be to ask the pupils what kind of temples they know or if they know the word “sanctuary”. While temples and sanctuaries would be perceived as rather rare and exotic to many Scandinavian children up until recently, they now encounter them not only in the popular culture of their surroundings but also increasingly so in their neighborhoods. For the majority of Norwegian pupils, the main source of knowledge about temples, (apart from what is taught at school), is no doubt popular culture.⁹ In addition to the various temples and sanctuaries in the transmediated Lego, other movies as dissimilar as *Karate Kid*, *Mulan*, *Coco*, and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy also provide different representations of temples or private shrines that may be brought into a learning conversation. These representations are certainly not unproblematic, and the challenges with such representations from popular culture will be more thoroughly discussed below. The point to be made here, however, is that in terms of what we identify as religion, these representations are likely to be the “familiar” to many of the pupils.

Meditation and mantras are equally normalized through children’s popular culture, whether it is the quest for “inner peace” in the *Kung Fu Panda* movies, or “the Great Mellow” ritual of the gorilla tribe in *Lego Chima* (Undheim, 2016; cf. Zetterqvist & Skeie, 2014).

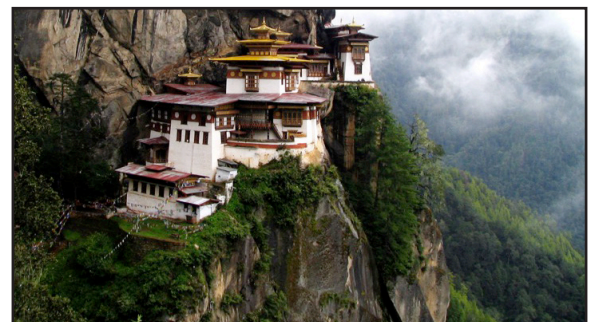


Figure 5. Temples and Lego temples (clockwise from upper left):

A. Ninjago: Monastery of Spinjitzu

B. Paro Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) monastery in Bhutan

C. Lego version of Paro Taktsang.

⁹ Except, of course, for those belonging to religious traditions where temples are central to their family's religious practices.



Figure 5 (cont). Temples and Lego temples (clockwise from upper left):

D. Kuong Viet temple, Lørenskog, Norway

E. Temple, Buddhachinnawong Meditations, Kristiansand, Norway

F. Lego version of Parthenon



Questions like “What is a temple?”, “Do all temples look like this one?” and “How can we recognize a temple” may all take the pupils’ own interest and curiosity as a starting point without posing questions that may lead the pupil to feel a need to “confess” or identify with any specific religious tradition.

Supplementing the learning conversation with images of various temples, whether from Lego’s transmedia platforms, the local community or other geographical locations, will open for this variety and may be a way for the students themselves to engage in discussion of similarities and differences (Figure 5). Without necessarily aiming at correcting the pop cultural representations (cf. Reuber, 2011), the dialectics of familiar and strange will increase learning and open for plurality. The possibility for pupils to build their own temples or other religious buildings with Lego bricks is another learning activity that engages material religion and can highlight aesthetic aspects of religion. Building Lego can thus also provide input and time for explorative conversations, in line with the focus on conversations as learning activities for the youngest children. Using the bricks to construct various religious buildings is also a means to engage “embodied” learning without participating in religious activities that may conflict with the child or its parents’ religious convictions (cf. Schroeder, 2016).

There is certainly still the possibility that children or pupils wish to share information about their religious beliefs and practices during conversations, but nothing in the material/artifact necessitates the sharing of this kind of information. The older students may be led in conversation-based learning, supported by visual representations, from the phoenixes of Chima, Harry Potter and other instances of popular culture to those in Christian symbolism, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece or “firebirds” of Chinese traditions (Figure 6). In this way, the pupils will be able to contextualize the symbols and concepts that they now mainly know from contemporary popular media.

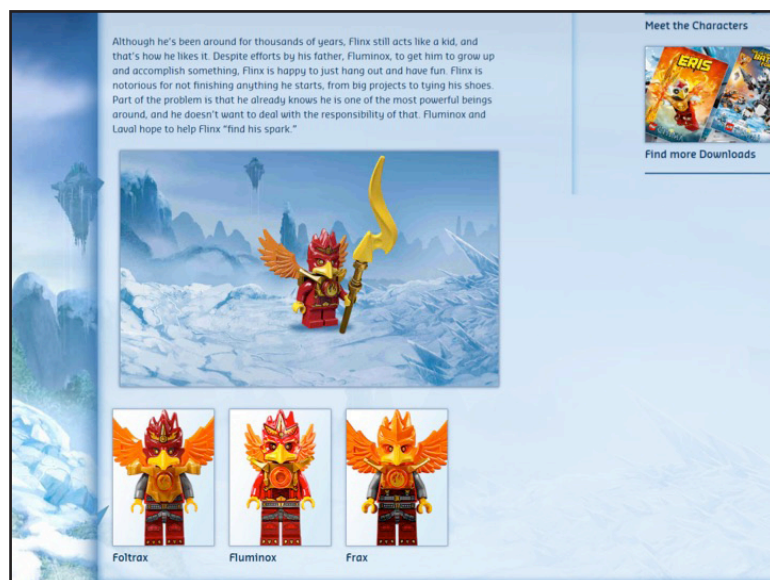


Figure 6.

A. Legend of Chima Phoenixes.

B. Apse from the Basilica dei Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome (left).

4 Lego religion in kindergarten and primary school?

Many teachers, in Norway as well as elsewhere, have some idea of what their pupils know and how to use this knowledge as an entrance to teaching, whether there's a completely new topic or more specific concepts and "facts". The Norwegian subject of Christianity, religion, philosophy of life and ethics (abbreviated KRLE) is a mandatory subject that is taught through years 1–10. Despite the controversial naming of the subject, which might indicate otherwise, the subject is non-confessional and meant to include all students, regardless of their family's religious affiliation (Alberts, 2007, 2011; Skeie, 2016). According to the Norwegian Education Act, and as also underlined in the curriculum, KRLE is to be taught in an "objective, critical and pluralistic manner" and it is explicitly stated that classroom teaching "shall not include preaching, proselytising or religious practice" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015).¹⁰ The framework plan for Norwegian kindergarten likewise lists ethics, religion and philosophy as one of seven subject areas to be covered. The framework plan states that by working on this subject area, "kindergartens shall help to ensure that children learn about religions, ethics and philosophy as aspects of culture and society" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2011, p. 38).¹¹

Learning about religion is thus considered an important and mandatory part of Norwegian public education.¹² While the framework plan for kindergartens stresses that employees give children the opportunity to talk about different religious expressions and ideas, the curriculum for primary school has a very WRP-centered organization of the learning outcomes. "Religion" is here basically constructed as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and/or Hinduism (Undheim, 2013). As Trine Anker has pointed out, plurality is represented as something that exists *between* these five religions, and not *within* them (Anker, 2017). In the plans for both kindergarten and primary school however, there is a very conversation-oriented focus in the competence aims. Terms like "talk about", "relate", "be familiar with" and "recognize" dominate both plans and reveal that the learning activities are centered on verbal activities (KLRE, 2015).

¹⁰ These formulations are very much the result of controversies that several times have been brought to the fore in the Norwegian integrative religious education since its introduction in 1997, and that in 2007 led to the European Court of Human Rights requiring the Norwegian state to make changes in the curriculum in order to uphold its commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Alberts, 2011; von der Lippe, 2017).

¹¹ A new framework plan for Norwegian kindergartens will be in effect from August 2017. This new plan has kept the "learning area" of ethics, religion and philosophy from the previous plan and appears to stress conversations even more strongly, for instance in the goal that "staff must engage with the children in conversations about religious and cultural expressions, and be aware of how their own participation [in the conversation] may support and broaden the children's thought processes" (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, my translation).

¹² Private schools are very marginal in Norway, and the very few schools that practice alternative pedagogics (Montessori, Rudolf Steiner Schools) or are based on religion (almost all tied to Christian denominations) are also required to adapt to the competence aims of national curricula, as in KRLE.

5 Didactical considerations

5.1 Teaching the familiar and the strange

One increasingly compelling issue concerning RE in kindergarten and primary school is not only the rapid religious changes on both a local and a global scale. In addition to religious diversity being the “bare facts” of contemporary society in Norway, there is the rise of the so-called “nones”, those who for various reasons do not identify with any set religious tradition (Wallis, 2014; Woodhead, 2016). As discussed above, the World Religion Paradigm as well as the hegemony of Christianity in the RE curriculum are rather outdated. While RE in Norway previously had taken some kind of Christianity-based “common ground” for granted, this is no longer a liable starting point. My claim is therefore that, from a study of religion perspective, a non-confessional approach that at least occasionally takes its starting point in children’s (popular) culture has didactic benefits. Lego is thus just one of many potential examples that may prove instructive in unexpected ways.

A hermeneutic view on knowledge production entails a process in which the known, or a set of preconceptions, is expanded and/or altered in the encounter with something unknown, or new. In order to learn, one has to be exposed to something new or not already known. This fits well also with the almost programmatic claim raised by Mark Muesse (1999) in his brief article on the Heaven’s Gate religious group. The very reason we have to continue to study religion, Muesse argues, is that we will thereby not only make „the strange“ more familiar, but also „make the familiar strange“. Only by insisting on the human obligation to learn and to understand other humans can we legitimize an RE that is based on the scientific study of religion. The same point is stressed by Jonathan Smith in *Relating Religion*. Smith also points at the importance of comparative religious studies as a way of approaching the challenges of the pluralistic societies of today:

The future of our increasingly diverse societies will call on all our skills at critical translation; all our abilities to occupy the contested space between the near and the far; all our capacities for the dual project of making familiar what, at first encounter, seems strange, and making strange what we have come to think of as all-too-familiar. (Smith, 2004, p. 389)¹³

The hermeneutic pendulum that constantly moves between the familiar to the strange is thus a premise for the following discussion. A pressing question, however, in a pluralistic, multicultural classroom in Norway today is, What constitutes “the familiar”? And what constitutes “the strange”? Instead of operating within the rather rigid framework of Christianity or World Religion Paradigm,¹⁴ I argue that popular culture, particularly children’s popular culture, may potentially be a more including starting point as the “familiar” in religion education.

There are also other reasons to include popular culture in RE. A recurring concern against a “study of religion-based” RE in Norway has been the purported loss of student perspective and reduced possibilities to engage them on a more personal level (e.g., Fuglseth, 2014; Skeie, 2016). A religious studies-based RE has been accused of being too theoretical and distant from the pupils’ personal interests to be engaging and to raise their interest. However, “the cultural turn” in religious studies has brought on an increased focus on materiality and mediatization of religion that also legitimizes a turn to media and popular culture in the RE classroom. Studying religion as the human expressions of religion that we may identify empirically in society and culture, society and culture thus also ought to become the starting point for any non-confessional integrative religious education.

Although the ongoing public and political debates still demonstrate that the role of religion in public kindergartens and schools is by no means settled in Norway, the official documents support an approach that in the main is based in the academic field of the “study of religion” or the scientific study of religion, which is also the approach that this article is based on. To sum up so far, my suggestion is that children’s culture, also so-called popular culture and supersystems such as Lego, may be a valuable point of departure that can involve and engage the “familiar” without breaching any human rights regarding the right to religious freedom and parents’ right to decide the religious upbringing of their children.

¹³ This passage, and the perspectives of Muesse and Smith, are also discussed in Undheim (2017b) and von der Lippe and Undheim (2017).

¹⁴ For a critique of the impact that Ninian Smart’s dimensions have had on the Norwegian school subject, see Andreassen (2009; 2016, pp. 95–100).

5.2 Challenges and benefits of bringing Lego religion into the classroom

A central point in contemporary religious studies has been the role of popular culture and media as an arena for religious change. Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Stephen Sutcliffe (2013) maintain that new media and New Age religion provide us with a better framework that includes a dynamic and complete model of “religion” than more traditional attempts to define religion have. Religion as “aspects of culture and society” is thus not just the dogmatic canon of religious narratives, the calendar of different religious holidays or the local mosque or church. Perhaps just as much, it is the religious vocabulary and the elaborations upon religious narratives that pupils encounter in their immediate multi-mediated surroundings. To the adult teacher, some references may seem more obvious than others, such as DreamWorks’ animated movie *The Prince of Egypt* (a retelling of the story of Moses) or Playmobile’s Nativity scenes or Noah’s Ark.¹⁵

Other products that might be even more familiar to the children may slip, however, because they perhaps are less accessible to adults. A practical obstacle, addressed by many teachers interested in using popular culture in their practice, is the rapid turnover in what is the current “thing” in children’s popular culture. I am fully aware that, as I speak, Lego Chima and Lego Ninjago may already be completely outdated. Keeping up to date is a constant challenge (Cheung, 2003). However, teachers who are interested in their students will also be able to pick up such trends easily and stay at least somewhat in tune with whatever is “hot” at any time. Further, the ability to identify religious references in these cultural expressions may also partly depend on the teachers’ knowledge of religion, both historical and contemporary, as well as on global and local contexts. This is a challenge both for teacher educations as well as for strategies for continued learning after qualification.

A second potential obstacle is the economic and commercial aspects of popular culture and transmedia storytelling (cf. Luke, 1994).¹⁶ Many teachers see it as the role of kindergarten and school to counterbalance the constant commercial impact that children and youth are exposed to. Such “anchoring” of values is also evident in the core documents that formed the basis for Norwegian RE in the 1990s. If teachers do use commercial toys and popular culture as part of their teaching, they also need to reflect upon the ethical and economic aspects of introducing such material. As in all other aspects of the Norwegian RE, teaching is to be done in an “objective, critical and pluralistic manner.”

A third, and rather important challenge that needs didactic reflection is the dangers of stereotyping and misrepresentation. Lori Landay has demonstrated the controversy that arose around Lego’s Bionicle products in 2014, when New Zealand Maori protested against the appropriation of their language and heritage, arguing that these products “trivialized and commercialized their culture” (Landay, 2014, p. 69). Landay also discusses these challenges in what she calls the “sampling, synthesizing and remixing” (2014, p. 70) that she sees as characteristic of cultural production today.

This is also connected to the fourth point, namely, the potential “obstacle” that even Lego may find themselves accused of promoting a more proselytizing agenda. In such a view, Lego may be understood as no less impartial than other religious organizations. Spirituality and New Age are still met with much skepticism in many conservative religious communities, where the holistic and rather fluid approach to “the sacred” is considered a threat to dogmas and “true religion”. In this respect, the fusion of commercial interests, the mass media and (what some might consider to be) a dubious and hidden New Age mission may still be considered a daring project if introduced in a classroom context. So far, such worries have been raised by individual Christian authorities who have pointed out that Lego in some of their products is playing with satanical or dark forces. In 2014, a Polish Catholic priest named Sławomir Kostrzewa was reported as claiming that some of Lego’s minifigures, particularly those connected with the Monster Fighters series, were leading “to confusion between good and evil” (Day, 2014; cf. Undheim, 2016, 2017).¹⁷

15 Playmobil’s Christmas line – offering three different Nativity scenes, a set of the three wise kings, Santa Claus and angel ornaments – is among the most notable in this sense (see, e.g., <http://www.playmobil.fr/saint-nicolas-et-ange/4887-A.html>). Playmobil also carries a version of their version of Noah’s Ark in their line for the youngest children from 18 months old. Other toys that seem to approach the world of religion and spirituality are the numerous Disneyesque fairies and medieval knights and dragons that are produced by many different brands and found in many versions at the toy stores. A recent line called “History” also features elements from ancient Egyptian religion, such as a Sphinx, a pyramid and a pharaoh (see http://playmobil.com/on/demandware.store/Sites-NO-Site/no_NO/Search-Show?cgid=History), and there is also a new line called “Dragons”. Among Playmobil’s “religious toys” we also find Luther (Burri, 2017), and Zeus and Athena (Eptakili, 2016).

16 See also, e.g., Mikaelsson (2013) and Altglas (2014) for critical perspectives on New Age spirituality, capitalism and neoliberal ideologies.

17 Such criticism has for instance been raised against the Harry Potter series, which some Christian groups have claimed should be understood as a proponent of magic and the occult (cf. Undheim, 2016). I wish to thank Jane Skjoldli for confirming that, despite the somewhat not so trustworthy publication date of the international news reports (April 1, or April Fools’ Day), this was indeed reported in Polish media in March 2014 (e.g., “Ksiądz Sławomir Kostrzewa z Wolsztyna: W ludożkach LEGO jest szatan!”, *Super Express*, March 31, 2014, retrieved from http://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polska/ksiazdz-slawomir-kostrzewa-z-wolsztyna-w-ludzikach-lego-jest-szatan_389131.html).

It may however be countered that such reservations and controversies can arise whenever religion is the topic of learning and teaching in a pluralistic society. As Geir Winje (2012, p. 286) has pointed out, the material we work with in religious education, such as religious texts and art, often has a proselytizing purpose, and is often very expressive too. To some, then, Lego may be no less problematic than the use of other material and aesthetic expressions in RE. It is therefore important that RE teachers are also prepared for reactions from parents who are skeptical of such means in RE.

6 Conclusion

I will sum up by highlighting some of the potential ways Lego and other popular transmedia products may contribute positively in integrative religious education. Such material representations can serve as a starting point, a “hook”, that, in a multi-cultural and multi-religious classroom context may prove to be more unifying and familiar than for instance a focus on world religions or religious holidays may be (especially if none of the students themselves are familiar with these religious traditions or holidays). Although some parents certainly may regard the use of toys and popular culture in RE as irreverent or problematic, children’s popular culture might still be much less problematic than other teaching material or practices used in RE. It is also an engaging and student-centered way to approach some of the issues that otherwise may indeed be too theoretical or distant for the youngest students. My examples from Lego, I hope, have thus illustrated how children’s popular culture and their popular toy worlds may certainly be obstacles, but hopefully, even more so, valuable resources for RE and kindergarten teachers.



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