

Offend Not These Little Ones: On Toys and Children

by Rassaphore-monk Hilarion

Everything that can corrupt in example or depictions be put away. It is well known how powerfully corrupt images act upon the soul no matter in what form they might touch it. — Theophan the Recluse, The Path of Salvation

Statistics tell us that 80% of all toys are sold in the period leading up to Christmas. The amount of money involved is immense. In the last three months of 1985, one of the major toy manufacturers, Mattel, spent \$40 million on advertising alone. [1] By 1985, it was estimated that \$842 million was being spent annually by parents on war toys, [2] which, although now the most popular type of toy, still only represent one of many different kinds of toys available. Needless to say, profits, too, are enormous and where there is a potential for high profits there one will find the most sophisticated methods of marketing and advertising employed. And who are the targets of this marketing and advertising? Certainly not parents! At this very moment advertising campaigns are underway to make profits from the sale of toys during the Christmas season of 1989, the largest ever. Every parent will, to a greater or lesser degree, be affected by these campaigns. What should our response be? As Orthodox Christians, how should we view the question of toys in general? We will try in the following article to give some suggestions.

Anyone who thinks about the question of childrens' toys will sooner or later come up against broader questions involving the up-bringing of children in general, and in particular the role of the parents themselves in this process. What is clear is that the question of toys cannot be looked at in isolation. On the one hand, how a child plays is ultimately bound up with his Christian spiritual formation, and on the other hand, the forces behind the marketing of toys are exploiting the dark and hidden areas in the child's mind, which we as Christians understand to be the domain of our fallen nature.

The responsibility of parents begins at infancy. Bishop Theophan the Recluse, in a work that should be carefully studied by every parent and which has been translated into English under the title of The Path of Salvation, speaks very clearly about the environment parents must create if they wish to guide their children toward the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Theophan says:

Through Baptism, the seed of the life in Christ is placed in the infant and exists in him; but it is as though it did not exist. Spiritual life, conceived by the grace of Baptism in the infant, becomes the property of the man and is manifest in its complete form in accordance not only with grace, but also with the character of the rational creature from the time when he, coming to awareness by his own free will, dedicates himself to God and appropriates to himself the power of grace which is in him already by receiving it with desire, joy, and gratitude. Up to this time also the true Christian life is active in him, but it is as if without his knowledge; it acts in him, but it is as if it were not yet his own. But from the minute of his awareness and choosing it becomes his own, not by grace only but also by freedom.

St. Diadoch, explaining the power of Baptism, says that before Baptism sin dwells in the heart and grace acts from outside, but after baptism, grace settles in the heart and sin attracts us from outside. [3] Because of the more or less prolonged interval between Baptism and the conscious dedication of oneself to God, the beginning of Christian moral life is lengthened into an indefinite period during which

the child matures and is formed as a Christian in the Holy Church in the midst of other Christians, as previously he had been formed bodily in the womb of his mother.

After Baptism, parents and sponsors must lead the infant into a gradual awareness of the grace-given powers within him, and further to a joyful acceptance of the obligation and way of life which they demand. Then, when the child's powers begin to awaken, one after another, parents and those who are responsible for raising children must double their vigilance, because, although the longing for God will grow and increase, at the same time the sin which dwells in him will also not sleep. The inevitable consequence of this for the child is the commencement of an inward warfare. At the same time, parents must also engage in this battle with the sin that dwells within the child.

It is precisely at this point that unscrupulous interests enter the conflict. They have well analyzed the vulnerability of children at this point in their lives and have been quick to exploit the failures of parents, confused by the disintegration of Christian ideals in our society and perplexed by the latest trend in "child psychology," and often themselves the products of an anarchic childhood. Add to this the advent of television and the phenomenon of families where both parents work all day pursuing full time careers, and for whom the presence in the home of other members of the extended family is regarded as an intolerable imposition, and we have the root cause of the current attack on the innocence of childhood. The almost universal result of this state of affairs is that the television has filled the gap left by the parents. It is into this gap, through the agency of television, that the influences so injurious to the Christian upbringing of children have infiltrated; through this agency that unscrupulous interests are moving the minds of children with the express purpose of using them in the commercial exploitation of their parents.

This situation is the front line in the warfare which the parents must wage with the sin that dwells within the child. Developing senses furnish material for the child's awakening imagination, yet the imagination, although a gift from God, can be influenced and perfected by outside forces. More and more the influence is coming from television. Preschoolers spend more time watching television than it takes to get a college degree. By the time of graduation from high school, the average child will have spent approximately 11,000 hours at school and 22,000 hours in front of the television! [4] Sleeping is the only activity in which children now spend more time than watching television.

The nexus between toys and television is very strong. Up until recently, the three major networks, NBC, ABC, and CBS, did not air programs (primarily cartoons) created by toy companies because they recognized them for what they are—extended commercials designed to sell toys and not to entertain children. However, it is the content of these cartoons which is even more alarming. They often contain subtle, sexual overtones, which many claim are harmless. Women, for instance, often wear a minimum amount of clothing suggestively arranged over exaggerated physical attributes. Men too are frequently exhibited in the same way—totally remote of even the most remote vestiges of modesty. The story lines of many cartoons have their origins in humanism (a religion which teaches that man is his own god and man is the measure of all things) and/or Eastern religions, most often Zen Buddhism and Hinduism. Occult and satanic symbolism is ubiquitous. The toys that these "commercials" are intended to sell often come with little comic books which are laden with the same thinly veiled sensuality, occult themes, and satanic symbolism.

In many cases there is no problem with the toy itself, the danger lies in the occult and the often violent images connected with it, which are conveyed to the child via television cartoons, and now also movies.

The child "knows" how to play with the toy because he knows its abilities and characteristics, as seen on television. He no longer has to use his imagination to bring the toy to life. This has already been done by the cartoon. The child will visualize the same situation he has just watched. If it is loaded with violence or occult symbolism or practices, then the more he uses these things in his play, the more the occult and the violent will become part of his life. At a simply practical level, this spoon-feeding of images inhibits the development of a child's imagination, because under normal circumstances a child would project his own imagination into a toy. With cartoon-based toys, the child knows all the necessary information about the toy before he picks it up, the cartoon having pre-programmed him to play with the toy in a certain way.

Cartoons and the toys associated with them should not be taken lightly. Cartoons, filled with violence, the occult, and improper and sensual images, should be considered unsuitable for children of any age. Children see dolls as images of humanity, so parents must not give in to children's sometimes relentless demands to buy dolls which are grotesque, represent the idea of precocious teen-age sexuality, or are connected with occult practices. Unfortunately, however, children can often be quite persistent, and most parents are generally inclined to give in. Parents, however, must on no account allow children access to those toys, books, or cartoons containing corrupt concepts. The child's imagination preserve the objects of the imagination in the memory. How unfortunate is the child who, closing his eyes, or being left alone, or going within himself is stifled and haunted by a multitude of improper images. Why, we may ask, are so many toys and cartoons based on occult symbolism? To answer this question we must consider the people who are creating them today. They are a far different breed from the makers of the past. Many of the creators of toys and script writers of The cartoons which accompany them have come out of the 1960's generation, during which time many were involved in the drug culture and Eastern religions—some, indeed, still are. Few are practicing Christians and many were themselves raised by television. Therefore, since the ideas for toys come from man's imagination, then, if their thoughts have been corrupted by hedonistic and humanistic values, so the toys they design will bear the these influences.

A word needs to be said about films, which also compose the atmosphere surrounding children's play. The top money-making films today focus on the preternatural manifestations of the kingdom of darkness. Designed for adults were such films as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, *Omen*, and *Poltergeist*: for children, the *Star Wars* Trilogy, *E.T.*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Gremlins*. The *Star Wars* Trilogy, since it first appeared in 1977, has generated sales from *Star Wars* licensed products (i.e. primarily toys) of \$3 billion! [5] George Lucas, the producer of *Star Wars*, admits being strongly influenced by Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*—a cult book of the 1960's and 70's which chronicles the (what many thought to be true) story of Don Juan, a Mexican Indian sorcerer. Furthermore, *Star Wars* introduced many viewers to Zen Buddhism through the characters of Yoda, known as "Zen Master." Yoda taught Luke Skywalker, a type of Buddhist monk, about the "everpresent Force"—a term used in witchcraft down through the ages to describe the power witches receive from Satan! Lucas himself has said, "People in the film industry don't want to accept their responsibility that they had a hand in a way the world is loused up. But for better or for worse, the influence of the Church, which used to be all-powerful, has been usurped by film. Films and T.V. tell us the way we conduct our lives, what is right and wrong."

One might be inclined to say that even *Snow White* and *The Wizard of Oz* have some frightening elements, but the difference between these and more recent films does not necessarily lie in the content, but rather in the way the story is told. "Disney" films presented a world in which there was a moral order. There was a sweetness in the way the stories were told several levels removed from the

vivid realism of Indiana Jones, for instance. In pursuit of ever-larger audiences, film makers have escalated the amount of violence, brutality, arid sensuality, and aimed it at ever younger and younger audiences.

Disregarding the often anti-Christian content of these films, it remains that through them children are being taught that the demons they regularly depict are real—and not only real, but often friendly and helpful if approached in the right way—and this idea is being reinforced by the toys which are based on the Films.

In *The Path of Salvation*, Theophan the Recluse says:

"The whole attention of those who have responsibility for the Christian child should be directed to not allowing sin in any way to take possession of him again (i.e. after Baptism), to crushing sin and making it powerless by every means by arousing and strengthening the child's orientation toward God."

How is this to be done? It is something that must be pursued from the very moment the child's awakening powers begin to focus, and according to all indications this is very early. It is also evident that a great influence for good is exercised on children by frequently taking them—from the earliest age—to church, by having them kiss the holy Cross, the Gospel, the icons, and by covering them with veils. Likewise, at home frequently placing the child under the icons, frequently signing him with the sign of the Cross, sprinkling him with holy water, burning incense, making the sign of the Cross over his food, his cradle, and everything connected with him. The blessing of the priest, the bringing into the house of icons from the church, the service of molebens, and in general everything from the Church, in a wondrous way warms and nourishes the life of grace in the child and protects him from attacks by invisible, dark powers ever ready to infect the developing soul. Likewise, the spirit of faith and piety in the parents should be regarded as the most powerful means for the preservation, upbringing, and strengthening of the life of grace in children. But every effort will come to nothing and be made fruitless by unbelief, carelessness, and impiety on the part of the parents. The inward influence of the parents on the child is especially important. Where parents are "too busy" to spend time with their children, the children will learn through other sources. If parents cannot strictly control their children's viewing of the television, let it be banished from every Christian household, let no book or magazine depicting improper or violent scenes be permitted to cross the threshold. Let the child be surrounded by sacred forms and objects of all kinds, let his first memories be of the soft light illuminating the icons in his room, the smell of incense and the sound of sacred music. Let everything that can corrupt in example and depictions be put away. And so let the child grow in an atmosphere sanctified by piety.

However, training in piety, though foremost in child development, alone is not sufficient to help children battle the onslaught of the world. There should be an alternative to the dark culture that is inflicted on even the youngest and most delicate souls. If the child is exposed from the earliest age to the finest examples of western Christian culture, then by the time he is old enough to discern and choose between good and evil his soul will already have formed itself sufficiently and will feel revulsion for contemporary culture. Cultivating the child's taste for classical music, art and literature will give him not only an alternative to modern culture, but, what is more important, Will act as a stepping stone in elevating the soul towards the higher, spiritual culture of the Church.

But of course children must play. How should we arrange this in the Christian home? Up until this century, children did not need complex toys. Fascinating adult activities took place all around them in plain view. The child could wander down the street practically empty of traffic to watch the blacksmith at work shoeing horses, the baker bread, baking along the river bank women washed clothes and fishermen repaired their nets or put out in their boats. Today, children have no such freedom to wander about and even if they did, gone are those things which from the beginning of history fascinated the childish eye. Still, left to themselves with simple materials, children will explore and expand a plaything's imaginative potential beyond anything an adult could possibly conceive. Modern experts say that the best possible toy for a child between the ages of two and ten is a very large, heavy cardboard box, perhaps painted in various colors, which according to mood can be a house, a car, a boat, an airplane, a fort, a train, etc., etc., etc.. It can be pushed, pulled, carried or driven. A box can be anything! It is utterly unlike the typical over-complex, mass-produced toys which can do only one thing. It must be borne in mind that the more a toy is pre-structured, the more it inhibits imagination and creativity.

Researchers divide play and toys into four main categories: 1) toys that stimulate imaginative play; 2) toys that stimulate intellectual development; 3) toys that stimulate physical development, and 4) toys that are used to explore, examine, and experiment! It is important when buying toys to be sure that there is a good variety in the selection. Something for a quiet time to which a child might apply a good deal of mental energy or interact with others to play; books and puzzles for intellectual development, and perhaps building blocks and art materials to develop skills. It is important to aim for balance and diversity when buying toys.

In conclusion, one should be aware of the forces of evil which are now concentrating their energies on the exploitation and corruption of children and banish these influences from the home. It is also important to remember that parental behavior and love is a primary influence on children and, however, unfashionable it may be to say it at the moment it must, nevertheless, also be said in the strongest and most unequivocal terms possible—a woman's place is in the home with her children! Even if this means being financially less well off—this is a fleeting consideration. We must remember that small, eternal souls depend on the direction their parents give them now in childhood, for "it is in accordance with the taste of one's own heart that the future eternal mansion will be given and that the taste in one's heart there will be the very one that is formed here!"

Endnotes

1. "Children's Cartoons Designed to Sell Kids' Toys," *The Detroit News*, Nov. 10, 1985, P. 4E.
2. "Coalition on TV Violence Says War Toys Now the Most Popular," *Religious News Service*, July 16, 1985.
3. Bishop Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation*, tr. by Hieromonk Seraphim (Rose), West Coast Orthodox Supply, 1983, p. 19.
4. Phillips, Phil, *Turmoil in the Toybox*, Starburst Inc., 1986 p. 41.
5. *Toy and Hobby World*, Feb., 1986.
6. Phillips, op. cit., p.150.
7. Maynard, Fredelle, *Guiding Your Child to a More Creative Life*, Doubleday and Co., N.Y., 1973, p. 84.
8. Johnson, Doris McN., *Children's Toys and Books*, Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1982, p.31.