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Buddhist Themes in Medieval, Serbian & Russian Literature: the Manuscript of Barlaam and Ioasaph

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1. The Content of the Story¹

Avenir, a mighty emperor who was an idol worshiper and a fierce persecutor of Christians, lived in faraway India. For a long time, he had no children but, finally, the Emperor had a son who was the most handsome boy in the world. The prince was named Ioasaph. Wise men knowledgeable in star gazing and telling fortunes from them came to celebrate the child's birth. Avenir asked the wise men about the fate of the newly-born baby and they answered that the prince's wealth and property would exceed all the emperors who preceded him. The oldest of the soothsayers predicted that Ioasaph's glory would come to him not in his father's kingdom, but in another one, which would be better; the son would accept the very Christianity the father persecuted.

The emperor was upset at what he heard. In order to prevent the prophecy from happening, he had a separate palace built for the prince, where he placed the teenage son. Avenir surrounded his son by handsome teachers and servants so that the prince could see none of life's miseries. However, Ioasaph could not leave the palace.

Once he became a young man and received a basic education, the prince was allowed to go beyond the palace limits. Due to the carelessness of his servants on an outing, Ioasaph saw two cripples and on another outing a very old man. The servants explained to the prince that sickness and old age were unavoidable for human beings. The existence of suffering, old age and death made the prince think about the senselessness of life and he began to pine over his realization.

At the same time in the faraway Senar desert, Barlaam, the hermit, lived a life of austerity. Through God's revelation, he learned about the young man's search for truth. Under the guise of a merchant, Barlaam left for India and reached the prince's hometown. Barlaam announced that he had a precious, miracle-causing stone, with a healing capacity. He was brought before the prince. Once there, he explained the Christian faith to the prince, telling parables and quoting holy scripture. From Barlaam's teaching, the prince understood that the precious stone with miraculous qualities was a faith in Jesus Christ. The hermit baptized the prince and then returned to the desert.

Having found out about this, the Emperor became sad and angry. Following the advice of a nobleman Araches, he organized a debate between heathens and Christians on the town square. A magician named Nachor was brought to the debate to impersonate Barlaam. In the course of this debate, Nachor—representing Christianity—had to acknowledge defeat and thereby bring Ioasaph back to the pagan faith. In his sleep, Ioasaph had a vision that made him see the deceit. He threatened the fake Barlaam with a fierce punishment if the latter acknowledged defeat. Frightened by this threat, Nachor defended Christianity superbly by pointing out the defects of all other existing religions. With heathens defeated, Nachor became a hermit.

Following the advice of another magician's advice, the Emperor attempted to use

female beauty to lure Ioasaph away from Christianity but did not succeed. Then his adviser Araches suggested to the Emperor that he give one half of his empire to Ioasaph with the hope that worldly preoccupations would take his mind away from religion, but the opposite happened. In his part of the Kingdom, Ioasaph established a Christian kingdom to which his father's subjects flocked. Seeing this, the Emperor became a Christian too even though he soon died.

Ioasaph, then retreated to the desert where he lived in a cave with Barlaam. After Barlaam's death, Ioasaph remained alone in the same cave and he lived in the desert for 35 years before dying peacefully. Another hermit buried Ioasaph in Barlaam's grave. After that, he went to India to tell about Ioasaph's death. Along with a multitude of people, the Emperor Barachias came to the Senar desert where he found both bodies intact. He ordered the bodies be brought to India and buried in a temple which Ioasaph had built. Many miracles and healings took place on that grave.

The story is primarily a dialogue, approximately two parts of the story consist of direct speech between Barlaam and Ioasaph.

Because of its unusual combination of Buddhist and Christian elements, the medieval story of Barlaam and Ioasaph has long attracted the attention of medievalists and historians of comparative literature. Written in the Byzantium during the iconoclastic controversy, the story dates to the 7th century. Intended to be a summary of Christian creed, it contains two constituents of Buddhist origin: the story of Ioasaph's childhood before leaving his father's home and the nine parables interspersed through the narrative that illuminate and underscore different philosophical and moral issues. The first constituent faithfully follows the legend of the historical Buddha² before the great renunciation; the second one can be traced to Indian animal tales contained in Jatakas, tales of the Buddha's previous incarnations. What has not been done is to probe deeper into the Christian religious content of this story and to find Buddhist religious philosophy under Christian guise. The purpose of this paper is to identify certain elements of Buddhist religious thinking within Barlaam's instruction to Ioasaph on Christian faith.

2. The Buddhist Influence

Three characteristics of all phenomena in Buddhism,³ whether subjective (thoughts, feelings or moods) or objective, are impermanence (change, unsatisfactoriness (suffering), and voidness of any self-nature (No-I). Impermanence implies that everything we know in the internal as well as the external world is in a constant state of flux. Several passages in *Barlaam and Ioasaph* express this characteristic of impermanence. Such is Barlaam's statement. "I also loved, and clave to its pleasures and delights. But, when I perceived with the unerring eyes of my mind how all human life is wasted in these things that come and go."⁴ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*:205.) The metaphor, "Rivers and streams, with their water moving interruptedly," aptly expresses the notion of impermanence. Barlaam compares the security human beings search for in life, be it in wealth or honor, with rushing torrents. "'Tis like the boundless rush of torrents that discharge themselves into the deep sea, thus fleeting and temporary are all present things."⁵ (p.205). Buddhism advocates that the three characteristics of all phenomena be grasped not only intellectually but also through personal experience. (Personal experience leads to a deeper understanding.) Barlaam considers his own nature in the cosmos of impermanence. "So from mine own

nature, I am led by the hand to the knowledge of the mighty working of the creator; and, at the same time, I think upon the well-ordered structure and preservation of the whole creation, how that in itself, it is subject everywhere to variableness and change, in the world of thought by choice, whether by advance in the good, or departure from it, and in the world of sense by birth and decay, increase and decrease, and change in quality and motion in space”⁶ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 247).

In addition, Barlaam considers the external, social consequence of impermanence. “For, I have observed how this tyrannical and troublesome world treateth mankind, shifting only hither and tither, from wealth to poverty, and from poverty to honor, carrying some out of life and bringing others in, rejecting some that are wise and understanding, making the honorable and illustrious dishonored and despised, but seating others who are unwise and of no understanding upon a throne of honor, and making the dishonored and obscure to be honored of all.”⁷ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 207). In Buddhism, the first noble truth of unsatisfactoriness or suffering is due to the sense of impermanence, insofar as humans cannot count on anything to last indefinitely. To irrevocably lose something brings about a perpetual feeling of insecurity and frustration. The most disturbing thing of all is the physical body with which one identifies. The body is subject to impermanence and unsatisfactoriness because it is liable to disease and decay. Passages in Barlaam’s discourse with Ioasaph indicate both unsatisfactoriness and impermanence in their close relationship.

“For what is there profitable, abiding or stable therein? Nay, in every existence, great is the misery, great the pain, great and ceaseless the attendant care.

For death is a debt due to nature, laid on man from the beginning, and its approach is inexorable. When our wise young man saw and heard all this, he sighed from the bottom of his heart.”⁸ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 59).

Ioasaph makes the following conclusion after his encounter with a sick, old, dying man. “Bitter is this life” cried he, “and fulfilled of all pain and anguish. If this is so, how can a body be careless in the expectation of an unknown death, whose approach (ye say) is as uncertain as it is inexorable?”⁹ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 59).

The third characteristic of all phenomena is voidness of any self-nature (No.I). This characteristic of phenomena is steeped in negative terms, indicating what is *not me* and *not mine* and referring to both subjective and objective phenomena, such as our bodies, belongings, feelings and thoughts. Voidness of self-nature suggests that whatever we attach ourselves to is perishable, impermanent and unsatisfactory. Taken as a discipline, it prevents an ego’s growth by its attachment to conditioned (impermanent) things. Barlaam divides all things (phenomena) into two categories: eternal fixed things and fleeting temporary things. “It seemed good to the foolish to despise the things that are as though they were not and to cleave and cling to the things that are not, as though they were. So he, that hath never tasted the sweetness of the things that are, will not be able to understand the nature of the things that are not. And, never having understood them, how shall he despise them? Now that saying meant by “things that are” “things eternal and fixed,” by “things that are not” “earthly life, luxury, and prosperity that deceives,” whereon, O King, thine heart! alas is fixed amiss,”¹⁰ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 21). Consequently, one’s ego should never be attached to the things in the second category.

The whole philosophy of asceticism is based on the voidness of self-nature, symbolized by the Buddha’s act of renunciation of the throne and the security which position and power bring about, as well as Ioasaph’s similar act characterized in the following way: “Such was the fire which was kindled in the soul of this fair youth... that led

him to despise all earthly things alike, to trample on all bodily pleasures and to condemn riches and glory and the praise of men, to lay aside diadem and purple as of less worth than cobwebs, and to surrender himself to all the hard and irksome fires of the ascetic life.”¹¹ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 565).

This motive of abdication of power and glory is based on the non-attachment of the ego to “things of the world.” The emphasis on things ‘eternal’ and ‘fixed’ in Christianity and things ‘uncreated,’ ‘unborn,’ ‘unconditioned’ in Buddhism is very likely a parallel development rather than the influence of one religion on another.

In addition to the three signs of being the Buddhist teaching of the “three fires” also finds representation in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. The “three fires” are want/desire, anger/aversion, and delusion/ignorance. They are called fires because of their sudden and overwhelming emergence. The three fires are considered detrimental to spiritual development because they turn the Wheel of Becoming by strengthening the ego. The delusion refers to the delusion of “I,” which in Buddhism is considered a fiction.

“Consider the wheel of men’s affairs, how it runneth round and round, turning and whirling them now up, now down; and amid all its sudden changes, keep thou unchanged, a pious mind. To change with every change of affairs betokeneth an unstable heart. But be thou steadfast, wholly established upon that which is good.

Be not lifted and vainly puffed up because of temporal honor; but, with purified reason, understand the nothingness of thine own nature, and the span-length and swift flight of life here, and death the yoke-fellow of the flesh.”¹² (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 555).

In *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, a confrontation occurs between an Emperor who was an unmerciful persecutor of Christians and a saintly man. The saintly man asks the Emperor to banish “anger” and “desire” from his court and to replace them with “wisdom” and “righteousness.” The replacement of the “three fires” by wisdom (which occupies a very important place in the Buddhist eightfold path) and righteousness is exemplified in Buddhist texts in the removal of a stone from a pool, whereby the water flows to take its place.

Within the ethical part of the noble-eightfold path in Buddhism is a precept of right thought that is the setting of the mental sights. With right thought, the mind is relatively free from the three fires. Barlaam in his discourse remarked that right thought precedes right action. Similarly, within the Buddhist eightfold path, right thought precedes right action: “All deliberation aimeth at action and dependeth on action; and thus, deliberation goeth before all choice and choice before all action. For this reason not only our actions but also our thoughts, inasmuch as they give occasion for choice, bring in their train crowns or punishment... virtuous activities are in our power, therefore in our power are virtues also; for we are absolute masters over all our souls’ affairs and all our deliberations,”¹³ (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*: 225). This statement brings up the Buddhist law of karma, of action and reaction. We are, according to this statement, punished by our sins and not for them, even if it involves our thoughts only.

The evidence drawn from these quotations is insufficient to indicate which school or branch of Buddhism influenced this medieval manuscript. Mattingly has pointed out that Ioasaph is a corruption of Boddhisattva and Ioasaph’s life and his deeds resemble that of a Boddhisattva. The relationship between Ioasaph and a Boddhisattva, is not purely linguistic. Like a Boddhisattva, Ioasaph was a lay person, not a monk and similar to a Boddhisattva he aspired to save all sentient beings before he, himself,

went to the wilderness to save himself. This ideal of compassion and service is in the Mahayana spirit.

Notes

- 1 The English text for the quotations in this paper is from G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingly's translation from Greek. G. R. Woodward, H. Mattingly St. John Damascene, *Barlaam and Ioasaph* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library 1953). The manuscript used for the Serbian translation from Greek is a fourteenth century church Slavonic copy of an earlier Slavic text. Currently, a part of the library of the Hilander monastery on Mount Arthos in Greece, it is identified as a Bulgarian recension. The Serbian quotations in this paper are taken from: *The Hilander Serbian Povest' o Varlaame i Ioasafe* by Maxine Evelyn Lowe Lebo, a dissertation submitted to the University of Washington in 1979. The Greek Manuscript served also as a model for the Russian and Bulgarian translations. See Russian text of the manuscript, I.N. Lebedeva, *Povest' o Varlaame i Ioasafe* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985). It is based on the Bol'shakov manuscript, which is the best preserved among all other old Russian manuscripts.
- 2 The controversy of who the author of *Barlaam and Ioasaph* is as well as the question of the original derivation of the manuscript from a Sanskrit source is beyond the scope of this paper. I.N. Lebedeva discusses these points in some detail.
- 3 Annica, Dukkha, Anatta, the Buddhist terminology to which reference is made in this paper is common to all Buddhist schools.
- 4 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 119.
- 5 In Russian, Lebedeva: 165
- 6 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 112; in Russian, Lebedeva: 176.
- 7 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 120 (footnote 94) ; in Russian, Lebedeva: 165.
- 8 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 15 (footnote 12); in Russian, Lebedeva: 118.
- 9 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 33 (footnote 26); in Russian, Lebedeva: 127.
- 10 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 11 (footnote 9); in Russian, Lebedeva; 117.
- 11 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 327 (footnote 255). [This passage is missing in the Russian manuscript.]
- 12 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 321 (footnote 250); in Russian, Lebedeva: 257.
- 13 In Serbian, LoweLebo: 30 (footnote 102); in Russian, Lebedeva: 170.