



ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 5 1998:144–166
Publication date: 1 May 1998

Changing Master Narratives in Midstream: *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the Growth of Religious Intolerance in the Buddhalegend's Westward Journey

by

G. MacQueen

Department of Religious Studies
McMaster University
Email: macqueen@mcmaster.ca

© 1998 G. MacQueen

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

ABSTRACT

As the legend of the Buddha moved into Europe in the medieval period in the form of the story of the Christian saints Barlaam and Josaphat it became marked for the first time by deep religious intolerance. The article finds this structural shift to have been accomplished through two separate but integrated moves: a master narrative of emancipation through enlightenment is replaced by a master narrative of salvation through faith, and a model of religions as linked and overlapping is replaced by a perception of religions as closed systems that compete with and endanger each other.

It has been known for almost a century and a half that the medieval Christian story of the saints Barlaam and Josaphat is based on the legend of the Buddha.¹ In this great exercise of religious syncretism, scholars tell us, positive spiritual values and ideals were shared between traditions. Philip Almond, for example, remarks that the story of the Buddha, together with its associated asceticism, “were a positive force in the spiritual life of Christendom.”² Yet such assessments do not prepare us for the inter-religious terror and violence of the *Barlaam and Josaphat* tradition. John Hirsh has aptly pointed to the “atmosphere of persecution and intolerance”³ that pervades the story, and Monique Pitts has commented that, “*On devrait trouver que les textes arabes et chrétiens tolèrent moins que les textes bouddhiques une autre religion que la ‘vraie’.*”⁴ The present study is an attempt to enlarge on Pitts’ observation. I wish to investigate the shift from tolerance to intolerance that occurs in the Buddhalegend’s westward journey in the medieval period.

I wish to address my central question to the text, not to its context. I am not concerned in this paper with the historical and social forces that may have led to textual transformation. I wish to ask only how the intolerance and violence attested in *Barlaam and Josaphat* are related to broader changes in the story and in the symbol system according to which the story operates. I shall argue that we find in *Barlaam and Josaphat* a reformulation of the analysis of, and solution to, the problems of existence. We may refer to this as a change in master narratives.⁵ Stages in the transformation from one master narrative to another can be observed in early versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat*. This transformation, I shall argue, has combined with a significantly changed view of religion and religions to produce the textual shift in which we are interested.

I shall begin by giving a brief introduction to the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat* and to the three versions of it most important for my purposes. I shall then outline the master narratives underlying the Buddhalegend and *Barlaam and Josaphat*, and I shall give evidence of the stages by which the change in master narratives has taken place. I shall next discuss the place of religion and religious interaction in *Barlaam*

and Josaphat, taking the Greek text as illustrative of *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the *Buddhacarita* as illustrative of the Buddhalegend. I shall end by reflecting on the connections between the different master narratives and the different representations of religion, indicating how these two changes may be seen as jointly responsible for the shift from tolerance to intolerance.

Barlaam and Josaphat

The basic plot of the story is as follows. A king, who is proud and mighty, persecutes the religious ascetics that live in his realm and drives them out. He despises their world-denying and monotheistic teachings, for he is a hedonist and a polytheist. When a son (Josaphat) is born to him and he feels his royal line is secure, his happiness is complete. However, after the child's birth predictions are made by astrologers of two possible futures for the boy: he may become a great king of the realm or he may renounce the world and attain a different kind of glory. Fearing that his son's destiny will follow the second course the king sequesters him in the palace and keeps him away from the imperfections of the world. Josaphat eventually becomes dissatisfied with life in the palace and is granted permission to go outside, whereupon he has a series of disturbing encounters—basically the first three of the famous four signs of the Buddhalegend. At this point he is visited by the ascetic Barlaam—essentially the ascetic of the fourth sign greatly filled out as a character—who gives him lengthy religious instruction in monotheistic and ascetic religion. Eventually Josaphat is able to renounce home and live the life of an ascetic. Before his renunciation he must endure many conflicts with his father the king, and (in most versions) must briefly reign as a king in his own right. In the end, after a reunion with Barlaam, he lives a holy life and dies in the assurance that he will be granted a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

My summary is meant to show the borrowing that has taken place from the Buddhalegend. It must be admitted that it gives a poor sense of the story in its new forms. *Barlaam and Josaphat* is filled with stories not

found in any of the Indian versions of the Buddhalegend, and in time it became deeply imbued with Christian piety. The narrative frame familiar to us from the Buddhalegend eventually came to occupy a quite small portion of the text.

The Buddhalegend, transformed into *Barlaam and Josaphat*, became an extremely important story in Europe. It became widely known in Europe in Latin in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁶ During the subsequent flowering of writing in European vernaculars the story went through a further phase of popularity, and “from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century vernacular versions appeared in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Romania, Provence, Italy, Spain, Norway, Portugal, Russia, and elsewhere.”⁷ There was also a Middle English version.⁸ Furthermore, significantly new forms of the story were produced—in prose, verse and dramatic form.⁹

There are three versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, all of which precede its translation into Latin, that are of special interest and importance for my purposes. Two of them are Christian and one is pre-Christian. They are the Greek, the Georgian and the “Ismaili Arabic.”

(1) The Greek version of the story, placed at the beginning of the 11th century CE, is important as the ancestor, chiefly via Latin translations, of all later Christian versions. It is probably the work, in whole or in part, of Saint Euthymius. It is noteworthy for its ample additions of Christian material to the Georgian version on which it is based. Christian doctrine, as well as sermons, lengthy prayers and frequent Biblical citations, are characteristic of this version. Idolatry is even more thoroughly hated in the Greek text than in preceding versions of the story, and the theological bases of this hatred are more clearly articulated. The Greek text used today was established by Boissonade in 1832, and an English translation by Woodward and Mattingly was published, together with the Greek text, in the Loeb Classical Library in 1914.¹⁰

(2) The *Balavariani*, the oldest of the surviving Georgian versions, is the most ancient Christian version of the story and the predecessor of the Greek version. It appears to date from around the ninth century. Of

the three early versions discussed here, it is, to modern tastes, the most successful from the literary point of view. It has cut out most of the meandering of its Arabic original while avoiding the prolixity of the Greek. It is a focused and powerful story. Ilia Abuladze's edited version of the text appeared in 1957 and David Lang's translation into English appeared in 1966.¹¹

(3) Of the surviving Arabic versions, the one generally recognized as the richest and, on balance, the oldest, is variously known as the Syrian text or the Ismaili Arabic version. The second title refers to the facts that the text is in the Arabic language and that the Ismaili community has preserved it. What relation it may have to this sect of Islam is otherwise obscure. It is not clear on the basis of its contents that the text is in any significant sense Ismaili or even Islamic. If I were forced to place it in a modern category I would say it is a Buddhist text—a monotheistic Buddhist text. It is very recognizably based on the Buddhalegend, with many details that are omitted from the later Christian versions, and it openly presents itself as a representative of the true and authentic teaching of “the Budd.” There are two traditions claiming to be faithful to the Budd, says the text, one of which is polytheistic and world-affirming and one of which is monotheistic and ascetic. It champions the second as the authentic tradition, and it calls on its rival to come back to the old-time religion. The Budd carried God's message to humankind, as other messengers have done in other ages. He was simply “*un serviteur de Dieu et un médecin des âmes.*”¹² Daniel Gimaret edited the Arabic text (1972) and translated it into French (1971).¹³

The New Master Narrative

The Indian Buddhalegend is not so much constructed according to a master narrative as it is the primary expression of a master narrative. That is, the Buddhalegend is the historically most ancient complete formulation of a narration of human liberation that came in time to underlie and tie together many otherwise discrete Buddhist tales, rituals and doctrines.

The master narrative to which the legend gives voice may be expressed as follows. *The Great Being, having recognized the wretchedness of the condition of living beings in the world, has discovered the possibility of Freedom and the path to its attainment, and having himself attained this Freedom he has communicated the path to the world, thereby making Freedom a possibility for us all.* This is a narrative of emancipation through enlightenment. *Recognizing the wretchedness of our condition and discovering the path to Freedom* are two key moments in a process of increasing insight or enlightenment upon which the emancipation of the world depends. In the story of the Buddha's final lifetime—the Buddhalegend in its strict sense¹⁴—these two moments are embodied in, respectively, the insight into the imperfection of the world in the three signs, and the awakening under the Bodhi tree (prefigured in the fourth sign), which makes manifest the Middle Way.

The master narrative is merely the macrocosmic expression of an essential story line that is, in its microcosmic form, found elsewhere in Buddhist literature¹⁵: *A wise being, having become aware that he and others are trapped and in danger, discovers a way out of the trap and takes himself and others to freedom.* Stories with this plot structure are, like the story of the Buddha's final life, built according to a pattern of emancipation through insight or enlightenment.¹⁶ They simply deal with more limited forms of emancipation and enlightenment.

The story of Barlaam and Josaphat, as known in Christendom, borrows heavily from the Indian Buddhalegend and may appear, on first reading, to echo the same master narrative. But in fact the master narrative according to which *Barlaam and Josaphat* is structured is one concerned with salvation through faith. *God offers salvation to all human beings. Those who have faith in Him, that is, accept God's offer and turn wholly to Him, obeying His will and simultaneously turning away from Satan and the lure of the world, are saved, while all others are damned.* The story of *Barlaam and Josaphat* has preserved a good deal of the longing for emancipation from the imperfections of the world that is evident in the Buddhalegend, but emancipation—from Satan and the world

—is merely a first step toward the attainment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Moreover, enlightenment has been transformed: insight, which is given by God, comes with faith. It is conjoined to the movement of the will towards God. Such insight, with which *Barlaam and Josaphat* is greatly concerned, is never more than partial in this life, becoming full only when one has been granted a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

There are discernible stages by which the story of Barlaam and Josaphat has altered the Buddhalegend to fit the new master narrative. Consider the two crucial points in the Buddhalegend where insight enters into the progress toward emancipation: the perception of the imperfections of the world (the perception that one is trapped: the first three signs), and the perception of a way out of the predicament (the Enlightenment proper). We may begin with the Greek version, in which the shift from one master narrative to another is far advanced.

Josaphat has been kept by his father in the palace. He knows there must be a reason for this entrapment so he consults a trusted tutor. The man tells Josaphat the truth: the king is afraid his son will choose Christianity and asceticism if given the choice. He keeps you under close observation, says the tutor, so that “thou mightest never hear of their teaching (*didachōs*), and choose it before our religion (*thrōskeias*).”¹⁷ Notice the change in structure: it is not merely the inherent nature of the world the father wishes to keep from his son but God’s message. God wishes to offer the teaching to Josaphat but his offer is blocked by the king. Immediately on Josaphat’s being told this by the tutor, “the word of salvation (*logos sotōrios*) took hold of his heart, and the grace of the Comforter began to open wide the eyes of his understanding, leading him by the hand to the true God.”¹⁸ God cannot be blocked by any mortal. The pagan tutor unwittingly becomes an agent of the announcement of the teaching. Even at this early point in the story, therefore, Josaphat is not simply seeking, he is being sought. The glimmers of vision that he obtains, which lead him to seek further truth, are due to the grace and action of God. We see here a reflection of the new master narrative. In the Buddhist master narrative Josaphat (the bodhisattva) is the protagonist.

This is now true only at the level of narrative surface structure: in the deep structure, in accordance with the new master narrative, God is the protagonist.

Josaphat then sees the three signs, and having seen them he has his first insight experience. He now knows the key truth about the world: “Bitter is this life...and fulfilled of all pain and anguish.”¹⁹ Thereafter he lives, like the bodhisattva before him, “in perpetual conflict and distress of mind, and all the pleasures and delights of this world were in his eyes an abomination and a curse.”²⁰ But Josaphat is not left alone in his distress. “While the youth was in this way, and his soul was crying out to discover that which is good, the eye that beholdeth all things looked upon him, and he that willeth that ‘all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth,’ passed him not by.”²¹ It is at this point that Barlaam, who is living the life of a Christian anchorite in the desert, learns “by divine revelation (*apokalypsei tini theothen*) the state of the king’s son,”²² and comes as a messenger of God to speak the word of salvation to Josaphat. Once again we see God’s initiative in offering the truth to humanity. Human beings must be given the chance to accept or reject the truth.

The second key insight experience of the Buddhalegend, the experience of Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree that turns the bodhisattva into the Buddha and marks the high point of the story, is in the Greek *Barlaam and Josaphat* nowhere to be found. There is a renunciation, and a striving by means of asceticism, but there is no Enlightenment.²³ The attainment of a state of full vision must be deferred. God alone can grant such vision, and it can come only after death, judgment, and entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. In place of the Enlightenment proper, the story has a variety of stages of insight. These come as a result of God’s action via his messengers. For instance, Barlaam announces the Christian gospel to Josaphat soon after appearing before him, in a dense and quite detailed form. There is little attempt to appeal either to Josaphat’s power of reasoning or his personal experience, yet “when the king’s son had heard these words, there flashed a light upon his soul (*phos autou periēstrapse*

tēn psychēn).²⁴ Josaphat announces: “All that thou hast told me I believe without question (*panta ta eirēmena soi anendoiastos pisteuo*).”²⁵ Vision is conjoined to faith and is a response to divine action. In short, it is not a question of Enlightenment of the sort found in the Buddhalegend, but of revelation.

If we look at the versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat* that precede the Greek, we discover the stages of this development.

Already in the Ismaili Arabic version the basic position of monotheism and divine action, of revelation in the place of enlightenment, is formally established. “*La vérité est venue de Dieu, Puissant et Grand, et Dieu a appelé à elle Ses serviteurs.*”²⁶ This position is manifested in several ways in the transformation of the legend. For example, we have a renunciant, briefly encountered, who prefigures the Buddha’s renunciation and points out to him the general path he must travel, now transformed into a surrogate father (Barlaam) who initiates Josaphat into an existing religious path. This changes the prince’s role from that of initiator to receiver. Yet in many respects the shift from one master narrative to another is not yet embodied in the structure of the narrative. In the first experience of insight, we are not told, as in the Greek version, that the king keeps the prince in the palace in order to prevent him hearing God’s word. The incarceration is, as in the Buddhalegend, simply a matter of keeping the boy from perceiving the world as it is and following the religious destiny indicated at his birth by the astrologers.²⁷ Nor is there any indication that the tutor has inadvertently become God’s messenger. Moreover, when Josaphat has his insight into the dreadful nature of the world, the text gives no assurance that God sees him and is about to take action, nor are we told that Barlaam makes his decision to go to Josaphat on the basis of divine revelation: on the contrary, Barlaam simply makes his decision after he hears Josaphat’s reputation.²⁸ Finally, Barlaam does not give his message in a condensed, creedal formulation and expect Josaphat to respond with faith. He gives his message slowly and carefully, in numerous parables and stories, Josaphat questioning him repeatedly and asking for clarification.²⁹ In short, Josaphat’s insight into the

nature of the world is portrayed in this version in a way much closer to the original Buddhalegend. Josaphat is not yet supplanted as protagonist, hero and initiator of action.

The second insight, the Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, has been creatively recast in this text in a Near Eastern monotheistic mold, but it has not yet been removed. As Josaphat approaches the wondrous tree, four angels take him into the air and show him all things.³⁰ He receives the vision from divine messengers instead of gaining it on his own, but he has it fully and he has it in this present life.

The *Balavariani*, standing historically between the Arabic and the Greek versions, deals with the issue of insight in a way that, as we would expect, shares some things with the Ismaili Arabic version and some with the Greek version. The second insight (the Enlightenment) is already entirely missing. The first insight is midway between the Arabic and the Greek treatments. Missing are the references to God's initiative that are so carefully inserted in the Greek, yet Josaphat is told by his tutor that his incarceration in the palace is meant to keep him from joining the Christians and causing "our nation to adopt an alien creed."³¹ That is, what is hidden from Josaphat is not simply the nature of the world but a particular religion. The fear is not that he will go forth and have his own insights but that he will join a pre-existing religion and promote it in place of the established polytheistic system. When, in the *Balavariani*, Barlaam meets Josaphat, he leads him onward gradually with stories and teachings.³² Josaphat's welcoming of the teaching is both less qualified than in the Arabic and less utter than in the Greek.

In short, there is ample evidence in these three early versions of the story of a gradual shift from a master narrative of emancipation through enlightenment to one of salvation through faith.

Religion and Religious Interaction

Religion and religious interaction are treated differently in *Barlaam and Josaphat* than in the Indian Buddhalegend. I do not believe the dif-

ferences are random. At issue are two distinct, internally consistent models of religion.

It seems wise to continue to refer in this discussion to specific texts rather than simply to groups of texts. While keeping the broad narrative traditions in mind, I shall, therefore, concentrate on the Greek version of *Barlaam and Josaphat* (*Barlaam and Ioasaph*) and on the *Buddhacarita*. The former text has been described above. The latter is the great Sanskrit verse version of the Buddhalegend produced by the poet Aśvaghoṣa in the first or second century CE. Those who look for a specific Indian version of the Buddhalegend as the ancestor of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat generally point to the *Buddhacarita*.³³

The Greek text, being the ancestor of succeeding Christian versions, may with some justification be taken here as representative of the family of Christian texts. The *Buddhacarita* must be taken with more caution as representative of the Buddhalegend. On the matter of religion, specifically, it should be noted that Aśvaghoṣa is more interested in, and sympathetic to, forms of religion other than that preached by the Buddha than the authors/transmitters of most other versions of the Buddhalegend. Still, I do not believe the poet's treatment of religion is so idiosyncratic as to invalidate this attempt to juxtapose the two models of religion.

The Buddhacarita

The *Buddhacarita* is quite aware of the existence of different religious teachings or systems. It uses such words as *śāstra*³⁴ (teaching, instruction, doctrine), *siddhānta*³⁵ (doctrine, tenet), *jñāna*³⁶ (knowledge, doctrine) and *darśana*³⁷ (view, doctrine, system) to refer to these, and it portrays proponents of these different systems engaging in debate, discussion and persuasion. But it does not acknowledge the concept of “religions” as thoroughly discrete and self-enclosed entities. It would be more accurate to say that it recognizes different forms of religion, or different ways of being religious. It recognizes *bad religion*, for example (this would include religion that is implicated in the injuring of living beings), but it

makes no mention of *a bad religion*. The single most important term in its negotiation of the territory between separateness and commonality is *dharma*, which it uses frequently, richly and playfully, mingling various Brahmanical and Buddhist shades of meaning. In addition to signifying (especially in the speech of brahmins) “appropriate religious duty,”³⁸ *dharma* is often used in a way that could be translated as “goodness” or “righteousness” in a religious but trans-sectarian sense.³⁹ Yet we hear also of different modes of *dharma* (*dharma-vidhi*)⁴⁰ and even of different *dharmas*, in the sense of different religious doctrines or paths.⁴¹ These *dharmas*—as religious paths, not as class duties—are connected with each other in a progressive series. The highest are those connected with renunciation and emancipation. So, for example, the *śramaṇa* teacher Arāḍa claims his ascetical teaching as “the highest *dharma*” (*dharmaṃ paramaṃ*),⁴² but after listening to it the bodhisattva concludes that it does not lead to liberation (*mokṣa*).⁴³ He therefore leaves, and strives until he discovers “the law of salvation” and “the excellent *dharma*.”⁴⁴

The relationship between different forms of religion is handled in the *Buddhacarita* with attention to both mediation and rejection.

(1) By mediation I refer simply to the establishment and maintenance of connecting links — in this case links between different forms of religion. Mediation can be described by specifying its three most prominent modes in the text: commonality, dependency and dialogue.

At all points of the story, even during and after his definite rejection of palace life and its attendant religiousness, we are presented with common values, values that are shared by the bodhisattva and his parents. Nonviolence is a case in point. While nonviolence is clearly associated, in the *Buddhacarita* as in other versions of the legend, with renunciant life, Aśvaghōṣa takes great care to portray the Prince’s father, Śuddhodana, as free from violence. Where we might expect that the Prince’s adoption of nonviolence has been in reaction to the violence of kingship—the theme is well known in Buddhist literature—this is not the case. On the contrary, we are told that his father conquered by good deeds instead of by war;⁴⁵ refused to execute criminals;⁴⁶ gave up feuds;⁴⁷ “laid aside

weapons” (*tatyāja śāstram*);⁴⁸ “did not learn science to cause suffering to others” (*nādhyaishṭha duḥkhāya parasya vidyām*);⁴⁹ and “worshipped with sacrifices that brought no injury to living creatures” (*yajñais ca hiṃsā-rahitair ayaṣṭa*).⁵⁰ In this way, the nonviolence of the Prince and, later, of the Buddha, becomes not simply a sign of difference and separation but also of continuity with the religion of his upbringing. The same pattern emerges in the bodhisattva’s interaction with *śramaṇa* leaders such as Arāḍa Kālāma: their discussions make clear their substantial common ground. Moreover, when the Buddha, having attained Enlightenment, decides to teach, his first thought is to communicate what he has learned to the *śramaṇa* leaders with whom he studied. He evidently feels they are very close to perceiving the truth.

Dependency, the second mode of mediation, is a subtle matter in the *Buddhacarita* and in the Buddhalegend generally. There is a strong tendency to portray the bodhisattva as primordially independent—wiser than both peers and teachers, progressing by his own efforts and the momentum of past good deeds. At the same time, this is a being whose progress takes place in relationship with other beings, both human and transhuman. In the *Buddhacarita* the bodhisattva’s parents and their religion (broadly speaking, Brahmanism) are the connecting link between the long series of lives during which the bodhisattva has perfected himself and his final birth in the world. This link is viewed as of importance and is accordingly honoured. Neither his parents nor their religion is portrayed as evil or corrupt; rather, they are taken as providing a perfect environment for his final maturation. Family and city pictured as the earthly analogue of the abodes of the *devas*, and emphasis is placed on their positive qualities. Indeed, the whole of cantos i and ii, which deal with the birth and early life of the Prince, are devoted to praising the appropriateness of his life situation. Brahmanism is part of this sphere of maturation. Brahmans predict the child’s destiny and act responsibly on behalf of king Śuddhodana. As E. H. Johnston remarked years ago in his translation of the text, Aśvaghōṣa’s “references to Brahmans personally and to their institutions are always worded with the greatest respect.”⁵¹ Moreover, the

devas, the transhuman forces worshipped in Vedic and Brahmanical religion and included in qualified and demoted form in Buddhism, are in the *Buddhacarita* constant helpers of the bodhisattva. Whenever his progress toward enlightenment seems in danger they stimulate it with various stratagems.⁵² A Buddha comes into being not by the simple rejection of his upbringing (though rejection is part of the model) but also through its support.

Dialogue is the third mode of mediation. There are arguments and debates in the *Buddhacarita* just as there are in *Barlaam and Josaphat*, but, although Indian literature was well aware of aggressive debating traditions, Āśvaghōṣa chooses a different way of describing the Prince's discussions with people engaged with different forms of religion. He presents several lengthy conversations on religious matters, where the bodhisattva argues with brahmanical and *śramaṇical* practitioners (with delegates of Śuddhodana, for example, and later with Arāḍa)⁵³ but these are carried out with rituals of mutual respect, in an atmosphere of tolerance free from force and threat, and with explicit acknowledgement of commonality. Although dialogue does not prevent separation and rejection, it is a means by which these are accomplished with mediation.

(2) It might be thought that such constant attention to mediation could leave no room for rejection. But renunciation, a central element of the story, necessarily involves rejection. The early cantos of the text, full of signs and reminders of the separation that is to come, are brought to a powerful focus at the end of canto ii when Śuddhodana, worried that his son will leave home, and having secured him in the upper stories of the palace, “kept him from *dharma*.”⁵⁴ It is clear that such a situation is impossible and must lead to a break, which it soon does. Śuddhodana's last words before his son's renunciation are, “he shall not go,”⁵⁵ but, we are told, that very night the Prince “went forth out of his father's city, in the firmness of his resolve quitting without concern his father.”⁵⁶ When the Prince renounces household life he gives up the religious system of the family as well. Brahmanism is left behind—not because it is evil but because it is not competent to deal with the realities of death and suffer-

ing. Arguments against the renunciation based on Brahmanical teaching are cast aside. Moreover, the rejection of Brahmanism becomes a model for subsequent rejection of the religious systems of *śramaṇical* teachers. The bodhisattva stops to discuss the quest for liberation with these teachers, and then he leaves. Separation and rejection become driving forces in the story, as important as mediation to the process of emancipation.

However tempting it may be to set up mediation and rejection as mutually exclusive, the temptation must be resisted. Both have a place in the story, both are in fact crucial to the dynamic of the narrative, and they occur simultaneously. Rejection of lower forms of *dharma* or lower *dharmas* is clear but does not lead to these being categorized as evil. It would be fair to say that in this text the bodhisattva, in his relations with religious traditions, does not so much reject the bad for the good as reject the good (Brahmanical religion) and the better (the religion of fellow *śramaṇas*) for the best.

Barlaam and Ioasaph

Some of the terms used to refer to religion in the Greek text, such as *pistis*⁵⁷ (trust, faith, belief), *eusebeia*⁵⁸ (piety, religion), *didachē*⁵⁹ (teaching, doctrine) and *kērygma*⁶⁰ (preaching, proclamation) are used chiefly as terms of approbation; that is, they are used chiefly to refer to Christianity rather than to the polytheistic systems the text is anxious to condemn. Other terms, of which *thrōskeia* (best translated as “religion” here) is the most important, are used to refer to both Christianity and polytheism.⁶¹ It is used as part of a model of religion that stresses the separate, self-contained, mutually exclusive and competitive nature of religious systems. When one asks a stranger, What is your name and what is your *thrōskeia*?⁶² this means, in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, something rather different from the question, asked in the conceptual framework of the *Buddhacarita*, What is your name and what is your *dharma*? The former question assumes both a more definite separation of the religious entities in question and a more intense friction between them.

In *Barlaam and Ioasaph* the multiple religions that exist are considered comparable (one might even call the section given to an inter-religious debate, which is based on an earlier Christian text called the *Apoloogy of Aristides*,⁶³ an early attempt at comparative religion and ancestor of the comparative religion that developed in the West in the nineteenth century) but only one is considered good and true.

In accordance with this perspective, the Greek text goes to great lengths to avoid mediation. Whereas the *Buddhacarita*'s protagonist is born into a family of high morality and purity, and is through this ideal family able to mobilize the karmic resources brought into being by his past lifetimes of self-sacrifice and training, Josaphat is born into a family of impurity and foulness. His father (his mother is not mentioned) is violent, deceitful, greedy, and idolatrous. Barlaam, the Christian anchorite, becomes a surrogate father for Josaphat and enables him to discover truth and goodness. Josaphat becomes spiritually elevated not only to the extent that he is able to negate the material world through Barlaam's ascetic teaching, but to the extent that he is able to negate his father and his father's religion. It is no longer a case of rejecting the good for the better and the better for the best, for there are only good and evil, and one chooses the good by rejecting the evil. It follows that dependency cannot be acknowledged. Just as Josaphat does not depend on his father for perception of the truth, so Christianity does not in any sense need paganism, even as a preparatory state.

The same process is at work in the verbal exchanges between representatives of different religions. In the *Buddhacarita* there is a good deal of argument between proponents of different religious systems, but care is taken to emphasize respect and commonality. In *Barlaam and Ioasaph* both the respect and the reference to shared values are largely missing. The first of two formal debates between members of different religions unfolds in an atmosphere of threat and anxiety ("Your bodies will I give to be devoured by wild beasts and your children will I deliver to perpetual slavery"⁶⁴) and the advocate for Josaphat's position survives only by escaping to the desert. There is little that could be called religious dialogue

anywhere in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*; there is instead a rhetoric of denunciation appropriate to the relation between two things at utter variance.

In its treatment of religion and religions, the Greek text represents one stage in a gradual development within the *Barlaam and Josaphat* tradition. The Georgian *Balavariani* treats religious interaction, for the most part, in the same way as *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. It holds that there are numerous religions (or creeds, doctrines and the like) and that one of them, Christianity, is good and true, while the others, or at least the polytheistic others, are evil and false. Christians hold to “the true faith,”⁶⁵ “true doctrine,”⁶⁶ “His holy creed,”⁶⁷ “the right doctrine,”⁶⁸ “sacred creed,”⁶⁹ “Christ and His religion,”⁷⁰ “the pure faith of Christ our God,”⁷¹ and so on. Against these are ranged such expression as “pagan beliefs,”⁷² “the error of the idolaters,”⁷³ and “the cult of idols.”⁷⁴ But there are occasional differences of significance. For example, while the God of the Georgian text is just as interested in hell fire as the God of the Greek text, Josaphat is noticeably less interested in using force against idolatry. He wins over his citizens through compassion, justice and incorrupt rule, and especially through his extraordinary measures to eliminate poverty.⁷⁵ These, not violence, are to be the means of spreading Christianity. The Ismaili Arabic text shows much broader differences from the Greek text. Although it already presents a model that pits monotheism against idolatry, a careful reading reveals that it has preserved far more common ground between the two opposing forms of religion than the subsequent Christian versions. There is a quite lengthy section of the text devoted to a conversation between Josaphat and his father from which we learn that the monotheistic and the polytheistic forms of religion represented by Josaphat and his father respectively are both descended from the teachings of the Budd.⁷⁶ They are sibling traditions. Moreover, it becomes clear, the polytheistic tradition, while seriously distorting the message of the Budd, has preserved many things that are good. The two traditions share values and insights. This conversation, with its extensive mediating elements, is almost entirely missing by the time we get to the Greek text.

In fact, by the time of *Barlaam and Ioasaph* the different religions

are seen not only as unlinked, unrelated and uninterested in conversation but as mutually threatening. If the term “demonization” may be used for the process whereby the world is divided into good and evil forces and the evil forces are embodied in nameable social groups or individuals, then *Barlaam and Ioasaph* has come quite far down the road to demonization. In the *Buddhacarita* Māra may be said to represent evil, but Māra is pretty much confined to canto xiii and is, in any case, not embodied in any clear sense in nameable groups or individuals, whereas in *Barlaam and Ioasaph* the devil’s agents can be pointed out clearly. They include women⁷⁷ (the Buddhalegend has laid the groundwork for this identification but has not gone as far as the Greek text) and, most importantly for our present purposes, idolaters. Non-Christian religions, or at any rate polytheistic religions, are not relatively inferior, like the forms of religion rejected by the bodhisattva, but absolutely inferior. They are not simply bereft of spiritual illumination; they are powerful sources of darkness. Idolatry is both a sign of a turning away from God and a chief manifestation of Satan, “the ruler of the world” (*kosmokrator*),⁷⁸ who has himself turned away from God of his own free will and who attempts to bring human beings into his realm. According to this understanding (which was historically common in Christendom), polytheism is not merely the worship of what is made with human hands but the worship of the devil. It follows that a Christian sovereign has a duty to eliminate polytheism, one way or another.

This raises the issue of religious violence in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*. A reader familiar with the Indian Buddhalegend will be surprised by the level of violence in the Christian story. Most surprising are the changes to the Prince’s father. Josaphat’s father, Abenner, threatens, tortures, mutilates and burns his opponents. This is a strange fate for Śuddhodana, so carefully crafted in the Buddhalegend traditions as a good king who rules as mildly as possible. It is not that Buddhist narrative is unfamiliar with violence or violent kings. In fact, there is good reason to believe that Abenner’s treatment of ascetics is largely derived from Buddhist sources (the story of Kṣāntivādin and the *Aśokāvadāna* are among the usually

mentioned sources).⁷⁹ What is new is the importation of this violence into the bodhisattva's home, and thereby into the relationship between his own religious formulation and the religious tradition of his upbringing.

The violence in *Barlaam and Ioasaph* is carried out, with few exceptions, by pagans, of whom Abenner is a representative, so a reader used to the Indian Buddhalegend might conclude that Christianity is being associated with nonviolence. This is only partially correct. It is true that rapacity and cruelty are associated in the text with paganism, true also that the Christian king is supposed to be just and merciful; yet for at least two reasons a position that criticizes all violence is not adopted in this text. The first reason is that the Christian sovereign has a duty to eliminate polytheism, this being a sufficiently urgent task that it may require resort to force. When Josaphat begins to rule his kingdom he is in most respects a picture of mildness and justice, yet he is fierce toward polytheism and does not hesitate to use physical force against it. Upon ascending the throne, "in person he besieged the idolatrous temples and altars, and razed them to the ground, and uncovered their foundations, leaving no trace of their ungodliness."⁸⁰ Again, we are told that "all idolatrous images were utterly demolished..And the foul fiends (*daimones*) that dwelt in their altars and temples were rigorously chased away."⁸¹ The second reason violence and coercion are not simply condemned has to do with the nature of the divine. Although the God of this text is a "God of peace,"⁸² whose "pity is poured out upon all men"⁸³ and whose mercy stands in direct contrast to the cruelty of Abenner and his religion, he is also a terrifying God, who has designed tortures lasting for all eternity for those who disobey him ("the fire that is not quenched, the never ending darkness, the undying worm, and all the other tortures...").⁸⁴ The images of burning that pervade the text are associated with two different realms, this present world and hell, and while in this present world it is Abenner and his associates who do the burning, in hell the responsibility is God's.⁸⁵ The atmosphere of anxiety and fear that pervades the Greek text cannot be said to be a stranger to Buddhist literature, where equivalent realms of hellish suffering are often vividly described; but hell does not have the

same implications for nonviolence in the Buddhist system as in monotheistic systems because the Buddhist symbol system does not require one to approve of these burnings. In *Barlaam and Ioasaph* God's violence is right, justified, good. In this context a person refusing to approve of any violence whatsoever puts himself or herself in a position of judgment against God. In short, both because of the need to take vigorous action against polytheism and because of the model the divine provides in dealing with idolatry and disobedience, the text is at best ambivalent on the matter of violence, including violence toward other religions.

Master Narrative and the Relationship between Religions

The connection that *Barlaam and Ioasaph* establishes between religious interaction and the underlying master narrative is quite simple. God offers human beings salvation and they must make a choice for or against it: the correct choice is signalled, in part, by acceptance of a particular "religion," namely Christianity, while a key indication of the rejection of God's offer is acceptance of a non-Christian religion. The choice is urgent since one has but one lifetime to make it, and it must be made clearly because there is no middle ground between the religions.

The author or redactor has put himself and his text into his interpretation of the master narrative. He and his text are agents of God's offer—agents, therefore, of salvation. He is faithfully handing down, he tells us in his introduction, the story of a Saint and son of God, whose deeds can, by being repeated, become powerful encouragements to spiritual striving. He can "in no wise pass over in silence the edifying story that hath come to me, the which devout men from the inner land of the Ethiopians, whom our tale calleth Indians, delivered unto me."⁸⁶

Note that there is no simple relation between a master narrative and its interpretation or application. It is not obvious that acceptance of God's offer ought necessarily to involve acceptance of a "religion" in the historically specific sense at issue here, or that turning away from God to Satan and the lure of the world ought to be associated primarily with acceptance

of other “religions.” Could not the fact that the story of Barlaam and Josaphat (a conveyance of God’s offer of salvation) has come down to our author/redactor from a non-Christian religion actually constitute a powerful argument within Christianity for a different interpretation of the master narrative? This argument has been made in the modern period, but it is precisely the denial of the non-Christian origin of the story that is characteristic of medieval tradition. The Buddha was accepted as a son of God, made a saint with his own feast day, and otherwise welcomed with great honor by medieval Christians. But they were unable to call him by his own name and to accept the implications of doing so.

In the *Buddhacarita* the link between master narrative and religious interaction is as follows. The bodhisattva, whose maturation to Buddhahood is necessary for the world’s liberation, must complete a developmental process that has been taking place, incrementally and through relationships with all sorts of beings, for aeons in the past and into his final lifetime. His progress involves, and probably requires, interaction with people engaged with various forms of religion. Common elements among the different forms of religion exist in profusion; conversation among participants is useful. In the end, other forms of religion must be left behind, one after the other, beginning with forms (such as Brahmanism) that value the things of the world and continuing through various forms of renunciatory religion. In all of this, however, there is no conception of religions as hermetically sealed entities and no conception of a particular religion as evil.

Final reflections

When I have presented this paper orally, some members of the audience have felt that my aim has been to identify Christianity with intolerance and Buddhism with tolerance. I have no such aim. Even at the textual level the generalization does not work. Buddhist literature is not uniformly tolerant of other religious traditions, nor is the enlightenment master narrative discussed in this paper the only master narrative operative in

Buddhist literature. Similar comments can be made, no doubt, about Christian literature and its complex relation to the master narrative of salvation through faith. Moreover, generalizations about tolerance work even less well when we consider the messy realities of history. There have been, and are today, plenty of examples of Buddhist intolerance and of Christian tolerance. In comparison to such vast generalizations, therefore, my aims have been modest. I have simply tried to compare versions of a particular story, uncovering the models of religion and religious interaction they exhibit, linking these to master narratives and pointing to specific interpretations of the master narratives that are evident in these texts.

This is not to say that we ought to be content to stick to our texts and forget about their connections to the extra-textual world. On the contrary, there is a serious need to study the implications for history of the acceptance of particular master narratives, models of religion, and interpretive strategies. If we were to examine *Barlaam and Josaphat* in its historical context we would have to take it seriously as a participant in European thought and action during the period extending from about the eleventh century to the sixteenth century CE, that is, during a time of intense religious violence, warfare and persecution. Taking the story seriously as a participant in history would mean treating it not merely as an effect of historical events but also as a cause, contributing its understanding of religion, of women; its images of burning and demolition; its sense of anxiety. A non-naïve appreciation of its influence would have to take into account the intolerance it promotes.

“Intolerance” and “tolerance” are, of course, more like short-hand expressions than accurate designations of what is at stake. Religious tolerance, for many people today, is a matter of accepting “the religions” as self-sufficient entities while finding ways in which these entities can manage to put up with one another. I am interested in criticizing the entities themselves. In attempting to find ways in which religious traditions can appreciate one another, learn from one another and change in ways that are humane—a project that I quite realize is based on perceptions, values and master narratives, but which I am happy to own—I wish to challenge

the self-sufficiency of existing traditions, to illuminate the connections that already exist between them but that have been mis-remembered or erased. *Barlaam and Josaphat* is a story whose origin is “pagan” and whose virulent denunciation of paganism was made possible only when the bridges to its past were burned.

Notes

¹ M. Laboulaye and F. Liebrecht independently identified the Buddhist origins of Barlaam and Josaphat in 1859 and 1860. Monique Pitts, “Barlaam and Josaphat: A Legend for All Seasons,” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. xvi, 1981, p. 3.

² Philip Almond, “The Buddha of Christendom: A Review of the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat” (*Religious Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1987), p. 406.

³ John Hirsh, ed. And intro., *Barlam and Iosaphat: A Middle English Life of Buddha* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. xxvi.

⁴ Monique Pitts, *Barlam et Jozaphas: Roman du XIVe siècle en langue d’Oc* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1989), p. 266. Elsewhere she comments that “In all the Barlaam and Josaphat versions, any religion other than the ‘True Religion’ is to be eradicated or, at best, considered a simulation of the ‘True Religion.’” “Barlaam and Josaphat: A Legend for All Seasons,” p. 10.

⁵ “Master narrative,” “meta-narrative” and “grand narrative” are terms that have been used fruitfully in recent scholarship, but there are no agreed upon definitions of them. I use only “master narrative,” in this article, and I use it to mean a narrative or quasi-narrative that (a) deals with issues of great importance for human beings (for example, human destiny or the nature of the cosmos); (b) has a position of dominance in relation to other narratives in a tradition, which it either explicitly or implicitly grounds and ties together; (c) functions to give a social group an identity and to make coherent the disparate activities and symbolic forms of that group.

⁶ John Hirsh, *Barlam and Iosaphat*, p. xix.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Hirsh's edition of MS Peterhouse 257, *Barlam and Iosaphat*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p xix-xx.

¹⁰ G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingly, trans.; David Lang, intro., *St. John Damascene: Barlaam and Ioasaph* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914). For a discussion of this text see David Lang's Introduction, pp. xxvi ff. and Daniel Gimaret, *Le Livre de Bilawhar et Buudaasf selon la version arabe ismaélienne* (Geneva and Paris: Librairie Droz, 1971), pp. 3 ff.

¹¹ David Marshall Lang, trans., *The Balavariani (Barlaam and Josaphat): A Tale from the Christian East translated from the Old Georgian* (Berkeley: Univ. Of California Press, 1966). For a discussion of the Georgian text, see Lang's comments in his Introduction to the Greek text, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, pp. xx ff. and Ilia Abuladze's Introduction to *Balavariani*. See also Gimaret, *Bilawhar et Buudaasf*, pp. 50 ff.

¹² *Bilawhar et Buudaasf*, p. 183.

¹³ See Gimaret's discussion of the text, *Ibid.*, pp. 9 ff. For the text in Arabic see Daniel Gimaret, ed., *Kitâb Bilawhar wa Buudaasaf*, Recherches Publiées sous la direction de l'Institut de Lettres orientales de Beyrouth, N.S. A, Tome VI (Beirut: 1972).

¹⁴ The Buddhalegend can be thought of either as embracing the final lifetime of the bodhisattva—his is what I mean by the legend in its “strict sense”—or as embracing his career all the way from his first aspiration to Buddhahood to his *parinirvāṇa*. The “strict sense” is more relevant here since it is this story that has provided the frame for *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

¹⁵ The distinction between microcosmic and macrocosmic expressions of a storyline I take from Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 37-38. Although Campbell's use of the Buddhalegend is often insightful, I do not accept his concept of the “monomyth.”

¹⁶ Consider, for example, the *jātaka* story where the bodhisattva is a caravan leader who successfully discerns that what appear to be friendly stran-

gers are in fact man-eating ogres (*yakkha*). While another caravan leader foolishly trusts the strangers and leads his people to destruction, the hero finds a way out of the desert and leads all his people to safety and good fortune. Or take the *Valāhassa Jātaka*, about a merchant who lands with his shipmates on a strange island. He discerns that the charming women who wish to take these men as husbands are in fact ogres (*yakkhinī*) who intend to devour them, and he manages, together with half his men, to escape the island with the help of a miraculous horse. Note that not only the overall structure but also the gendering of this story (man and male companions escape women who are death in disguise) has a parallel in the developed story of the Buddha's final life. See E. B. Cowell, ed. (trans. "various hands"), *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (London: Luzac & Co., 1969), vol. 1, no. 1 (*Apaṇṇaka Jātaka*), pp. 4-8, and *ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 196, pp. 89-91.

[17] *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, pp. 52-53.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

[23] Scholars have noted the change in the theme of enlightenment as the Buddhalegend has traveled westward, but their interpretations of the change have varied. John Hirsh says: "Unlike Buddha's renunciation, Iosaphat's is undertaken in certain knowledge of what he is seeking; his enlightenment has already taken place." (*Barlam and Iosaphat*, p. XXXvi.) Monique Pitts says: "For Buddha the goal is to achieve perfect Buddhahood; for Josaphat asceticism is a preparation for the real world, the one that cannot be seen." ("Barlaam and Josaphat: A Legend for All Seasons," p. 10). What is certain is that in the Christian texts, while there are moments of insight, there is no Enlightenment of the kind found in Indian versions of the Buddha-legend at any point in the story.

[24] *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, pp. 96-97.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

- ²⁶ *Bilawhar et Buudaasf*, p. 94.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73, 78-79.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86 ff.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- ³¹ *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, p. 67.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp. 76 ff.
- ³³ E.g., Hirsh, *Barlam and Iosaphat*, xvi.
- ³⁴ E.g., E. H. Johnston, ed. and trans., *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, “New Enlarged Edition” containing parts I, II and III, 1984), canto xii, v. 10.
- ³⁵ Canto xii, v. 16.
- ³⁶ Canto xii, v. 69.
- ³⁷ Canto xii, v. 13.
- ³⁸ E.g., canto ix, vv. 48, 53.
- ³⁹ E.g., canto ii, vv. 12, 16.
- ⁴⁰ Cantos vii, v. 12; ix, v. 21.
- ⁴¹ Canto. xii, vv. 44, 83.
- ⁴² Canto xii, v. 9.
- ⁴³ Canto xii, vv. 69-82.
- ⁴⁴ Canto xiv, vv. 96, 99. The Sanskrit is missing here, so we are dependent on the Tibetan and Chinese versions.
- ⁴⁵ Canto ii, v. 40.
- ⁴⁶ Canto ii, v. 42.
- ⁴⁷ Canto ii, v. 43.
- ⁴⁸ Canto ii, v. 52.
- ⁴⁹ Canto ii, v. 35.
- ⁵⁰ Canto ii, v. 49.
- ⁵¹ Part II, xv.
- ⁵² For example, in this version of the story the *devas* conjure up the old, the sick and dead man (canto iii, vv. 26 ff.).
- ⁵³ Cantos ix and xii.
- ⁵⁴ Canto ii, v. 55.

- ⁵⁵ Canto v, v. 39.
- ⁵⁶ Canto v, v. 83.
- ⁵⁷ E.g., *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, pp. 8-9, 282-283.
- ⁵⁸ E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 12-13, 22-23.
- ⁵⁹ E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 52-53
- ⁶⁰ E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 306-307.
- ⁶¹ For *thrēskeia*, see, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 32-33, 38-39, 52-53, 303-303, 370-371, 388-389, 442-443, 464-465, 490-491, 506-507, 520-521. It remains true, however, that although non-Christians regularly refer to Christianity as a *thrēskeia*, Christians themselves prefer one of the other terms to describe themselves.
- ⁶² See *ibid.*, pp. 344-345.
- ⁶³ See *ibid.*, XXXi and 397 ff.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- ⁶⁵ *Balavariani*, p. 87.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 155 ff. The theme has been retained in the Greek text but some of the most interesting details have been dropped.
- ⁷⁶ *Bilawhar et Buudaasf*, pp. 166 ff.
- ⁷⁷ *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, pp. 457 ff.
- ⁷⁸ E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 214-215, 262-263, 362-363.
- ⁷⁹ Hirsh, *Barlam and Iosaphat*, pp. xxii, n.1, and xxvii.
- ⁸⁰ *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, p. 511.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 515.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁸⁵ E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 211, 305, 313, 361.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.