

Medieval Islamic References to Indian Buddhism

SHIOJIRI Kazuko

The Inter-Religious Dialogue among Islam and other religions is the most urgent issue in the world now, but the efforts for mutual understanding of Islam has not been so effective as to contribute on the resolution of the conflicts between Muslim people and Western people.

In order to make good communication with Muslims who form the second largest population in the world next to the Christian's, the necessity of learning Islam in Japan has been claimed since 1960s or earlier. But the efforts to study and to know Islam in its normal sense have not been sufficient. Now we are in urgent need of studying and understanding the Islamic religion in order to exchange the honest opinions each other and to make up more peaceful coexistence that would continue to our descendants even in the remote future.

In this paper, I will present the Medieval Islamic theological references to the Indian Buddhism as one of the precious examples for inter-religious dialogue. These references were made by the Medieval Islamic scholars of 10th to 12th centuries⁽¹⁾. From these classical documents on the Indian Buddhism we could study the scholars' academic interests and the objective attitudes on the other religions that had existed on the periphery of Abbasid Dynasty: those religions were not the religions of "people of the Book" or of the protected people (*ahl al-dhimmah*)⁽²⁾, but the other religions that had been regarded as polytheism or idol-worship.

Among many medieval Islamic writings, there are very few that make clear references to their contemporary Indian Buddhism⁽³⁾. This paper will take up the works of three medieval Muslim theologians, al-Shahrastānī, al-Bāqillānī, and 'Abd al-Jabbār, and examine briefly their descriptions of Indian Buddhism. In those Muslim sources, Buddhists are called *Barāhimah* (probably derived from Sanskrit "brāhma^a") or *Sumānīyah* ("idol worshippers," probably derived from Sanskrit "śrama^a"). It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of mutual understanding between Islam and Buddhism.

Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal, vol. 2.⁽⁴⁾ (al-Shahrastānī, 1086-1153)⁽⁵⁾

According to *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, the *Barāhimah*, one of the religious groups in India, deny any prophets in the first place, and they are divided into three sects; the *Badadah* (*Bidadah*), the sect that specializes in contemplation and imagination, and the sect that believes in transmigration.

The author of this work first introduces an argument on the name of *Barāhimah*.

Some think that the etymology of *Barāhimah* is *Ibrāhīm*, but this is wrong, and those belong to the position of denial of prophets originally and primarily. Those who convince the prophecy of *Ibrāhīm* are seen as Indian dualists (*al-Thanaḥwīyah*). They insist the light and darkness following to the people of Dualist. These *Barāhimah* were derived from one person among them called *Barāhim*. The denial of the prophets prevailed within them originally.

The Barāhimah only believe in the prophethood (*nubūwah*) of Ibrāhīm, but the author of this work asserts that this name comes from the name of a person called Barāhim, not the prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham). Most of the Barāhimah deny prophets, insisting that no one with perfect reason (*al-'aql al-tāmm*) needs a prophet to know the ethical values. Those who have not achieved the perfect reason are excluded from the category of human beings and placed among beasts. The God has provided human beings with reason so that they know the existence of the God as the creator of the world, and recognize the God as the Creator of world, Almighty, and Omnipotent.

The biggest fault of so-called prophets is that they try to force fellow humans to obey them as prophets though they are all the same in their shapes, spirits and reasons as their fellow humans, and eat what their fellows eat and drink what they drink. The Barāhimah insist that the Islamic lawmakers made up the Islamic law (*aṣḥāb al-sharī'ah*) by distorting the role of reason, and teach the believers religious rates and various prescriptions on the life.

According to the Barāhimah the God's grace itself is His prophecy and revelation, and human reason is sufficient by itself for man to know the path of life⁽⁶⁾.

The Badadah (Bidadah)

The Budd (*al-budd*) is defined as a person who is not born, does not marry, does not eat or drink, and does not grow old or die. The first Budd who appeared in this world is called "Shākmīn" and revered as a noble master, who is said to have appeared 5000 years before the Hijrah (AD622). The stage inferior to the rank of the Budd is called al-Būdīs'īyah (probably derived from Sanskrit *bodhisattva*) who are people who seek the path of truth. They could reach the stage of the Budd with perseverance and selfless giving. It is indispensable for them to remain celibate, stay away from worldly affairs, avoid pursuing worldly desires and pleasures, refrain from engaging in prohibited acts, and have compassion for all creatures.

There are ten offenses to be avoided.⁽⁷⁾

- 1, killing anything that has soul
- 2, spending other persons' money illegally
- 3, committing adultery
- 4, telling lies
- 5, slandering others
- 6, using obscene words
- 7, abusing others
- 8, calling others with unwanted names
- 9, being ignorant
- 10, denying the next world

There are ten virtues to be pursued.⁽⁸⁾

- 1, being tolerant and virtuous

- 2, forgiving and enduring others' faults without anger
- 3, putting worldly desires under control
- 4, preparing oneself to leave this fleeting world for the eternal world
- 5, intellectually training oneself with knowledge and learning so that one can contemplate on the outcome of things
- 6, seeking to increase the ability to change oneself for a higher stage
- 7, having a gentle mind and speaking kind words to others
- 8, keeping a good relationship with friends and neighbors by giving priority to their preference rather than to one's own
- 9, avoiding involvement in worldly affairs and directing one's mind to the truth as much as possible
- 10, training one's soul so that one can love the truth and become closer to the truth

It is said that the Badadah have many temples along the Kankah river (probably derived from the Gangā), and imparted their knowledge to people. Many people from different groups and families became Budds, but due to their noble character, they only appeared in the palaces of kings⁽⁹⁾.

It is because of the special feature of India's natural environment and the existence of people who engage in such trainings and practices as mentioned above that many Budds appeared in India. The Budds believe in the eternity of the world, and this is the reason why the Barāhimah are said to be similar to the Greek philosophers in their knowledge and behavior.

People that specializes in contemplation and imagination

(aṣḥāb al-fikrah wa al-wahm)

These people are known for their astrology (*al-falak*) and astronomy (*al-nujūm*), and there are different kinds of astrologists from those in Rome or Persia. While the Romans forecast the future and the fate of individuals by the natural characteristics (*al-ṭabā'i*) of the stars, Indians do by the special relations (*al-khawāṣṣ*) among the stars, and so do they the same in the medicine and pharmacy. They also attached great importance to the contemplation (*fikrah*), and trained their soul and body in order to emancipate the contemplation and imagination from the worldly sense or feeling.

In this special training, we could see the same kind of Sufi's trainings. It also seems that there may be some relations between this group of specialists in astrology and astronomy and medieval esoteric Buddhists in India, as well as between the Sufi's groups⁽¹⁰⁾.

People who believe in transmigration (*aṣḥāb al-tanāskh*).

If a celestial body makes a circular movement, it will return to the same point just as the head of a compass returns where it started. This circular movement of the celestial body never changes until a different orbit is determined. Many of them in this group insist that it takes thirty thousands years, three hundreds thousands years, or sixty thousands years for celestial

bodies to acquire new orbits. While celestial bodies are composed of water, fire and wind, stars are made up of fire and air. Thus, for them, the transmigration (*al-tanāskh*) means the circular or spiral movements of celestial bodies.

This statement about transmigration is very ambiguous and is similar to the thoughts of the former group of people who specializes in contemplation and imagination.

***Kitāb al-tamhīd*⁽¹¹⁾ (Al-Bāqillānī, 940?-1013)⁽¹²⁾**

In al-Bāqillānī's commentary, there is a fairly long description about the Barāhimah in this work, which is mainly concerned with the argument about prophets. The Barāhimahs are divided into two groups. One group denies prophets and maintains that it is impossible for the God's wisdom and his other attributes to send prophets to his creatures. This group says that the God never sent prophets other than Adam, while some others in the group claim that the God sent only Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and deny any other prophets.

For those Barāhimahs who insist the prophethood of Adam or Ibrāhīm, it is impossible for the God to send the other messengers to His creatures. Because if the other messengers are from the same category of those who were already sent from the God and the essence of the two messengers is equal, the selection of superiority between the two homogeneous is impossible.

For the proof of this claim, they quote the example that in this world it is impossible for us to prefer one of the two same things to the other. If the other prophets other than Adam or Ibrāhīm are same and homogenous in the quality and essence, even God is unable to select one of these.

Their proof that makes the dispatch of prophets impossible and makes the God unnecessary of them is that the God completes the human reasons with which man could judge the good as good, and the wrong as wrong. He makes the reason the indication for right way and welfare of human being, and the prohibition from wrong doing. He also makes them as guidance and means for the necessary knowledge. It is impossible that the prophets turn up to work on behalf of the human reason. They then claim that prophets are not necessary to human being in whom the reason is inherent.

As we saw above, here also the God completes the human reason with which it is sufficient for human being to know the right path of life.

***Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah*⁽¹³⁾ (ʿAbd al-Jabbār, 935?-1024)⁽¹⁴⁾**

ʿAbd al-Jabbār is one of the most eminent names in Islamic theology and belonged to the later Mu'tazilite (medieval Islamic thinkers of human freedom and responsibility). He asserted the decisive role of human reason in carrying out the obligations given by the God.

He explains that the Indian Barāhimahs deny the existence of prophets and judge the method and knowledge concerning prayers and religious rites introduced by prophets to be evil in the light of reason. People with reason should reject that kind of method and knowledge relying on the perfection of reason (*kamāl al-'aql*)⁽¹⁵⁾. If the revelation, that is, the information brought by

prophets, agrees with one's reason, reason is sufficient for human beings. If the revelation contradicts with reason, one should reject the revelation together with the prophet that brought it. The miracles of Prophet Muḥammad are but a kind of magic.

In this context, the author not only refutes the Barāhimahs' denial of the existence of prophets, but asserts the necessity of the revelation. Even though he was a Mu'tazilite scholar, he could not but support both the reason of man and the revelation brought by prophets, though he claimed that the perfection of the reason was a self-sufficient criterion of judging the ethical values.

It is said that on the ground of self-sufficiency of the human reason the Barāhimahs totally deny prophets. This is also the reason why the Buddha rejected Brahmanism that had controlled Indian people with their special divine authority. In this regard the medieval Islamic documents suggest some important differences between Islam and Indian Buddhism.

Conclusion

As far as we have examined these references, it is the denial of prophets that most separates the thought of the Barāhimah from the Islamic doctrine, not the polytheism in India.

The Islamic reference to the Indian Buddhism is still vague and obscure for us to get the overall feature of medieval Buddhism in India. However, we can learn the enthusiasm of the Islamic scholars in the medieval times to know and understand different religions and thoughts of the neighboring regions. Even though the destruction of Buddhism in India was caused by the Islamic invasion early 13th century, there had been peaceful co-existence in India among the Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims for some time.

It is now our turn to study different religions and thoughts with open mind in order to bring about peaceful co-existence among peoples of different cultures and beliefs. We should make as much efforts as possible in order to settle the conflicts caused by the prejudice or disdain for the people of other religions, how difficult and painful it might be.

The Buddhism born in India 5th century B.C. had been introduced into Japan A.D.538 and the Esoteric Buddhism was founded by Kukai in Japan in 812⁽¹⁶⁾. Japanese Buddhism has nearly 1500 years' history as Islam has 1400 years'. Both traditions and activities of the religion have been still alive and gaining many followers all over the world.

On these traditional chains, I think, we should transmit the good results of our efforts for the inter-religious dialogue and mutual understanding to our descendants of remote future, just as our ancestors of about 1500 to 900 years ago had left their precious documents of the inter-religious dialogue to our days.

Notes

- (1) Among the Muslims' references to the Indian Buddhism, we have *Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind (Kitāb ta'rikh al-Hind)* and *al-Āthār al-bāqīyah* by al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-fiṣal* by Ibn Ḥazm, *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Bad' wa-l-ta'rikh* by al-Maqdisī, *Murūj al-dhahab* by al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd* by al-Māturīdī, *Jamī' al-tawārikh* by Rashīd al-Dīn, except those references treated here in this paper.
- (2) The term used to designate the sort of contract through which Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to the members of other monotheistic religions with revealed books on condition of their submission to the Muslim rulers or acceptance of domination of Islam. This system had been working well generally throughout the Islamic history till the fall of Othman Empire in 1922, in spite of several serious circumstances. Originally Jews and Christians were involved but soon the Zoroastrians, later, Hindus or Buddhists were included, and then the subject believers of most religions were given the same status. This co-existence of people with various cultures and traditions enhanced the creation of new sciences and civilization.
- See my articles, "Judaism in Medieval Islamic Society" (「中世イスラーム世界のユダヤ教」) in *Comparative Culture* (『比較文明』第17号、比較文明学会、Tokyo, 2001.) pp.60-65, "Islam and Judaism" (「イスラームとユダヤ教—宗教の普遍と特殊を考える—」) in *Toward the Inter-Civilization-Dialogue* (『文明間の対話に向けて』(伊東俊太郎監修、世界思想社、Tokyo, 2001.) pp.192-208.
- (3) Another famous author concerning the Buddhism in India is al-Bīrūnī (973-1050?), and his *Kitāb al-Ta'rikh al-Hind* (The Indian History) covered the history, religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology in India. But his description on Buddhism is not clear enough to refer to the theological studies. I skipped that book in this paper.
- (4) *Al-Mīlāl wa-l-niḥal*, vol. 2, Ed. by Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, Cairo, 1976, pp.250-255.
- (5) Tāj al-Dīn Abū al-Faḥḥ Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī. He was one of the 'Asharī theologian who taught at the Niẓāmīyah institute and wrote many books, but only some of them are known to be exant. *Al-Mīlāl wa-l-niḥal* is a monumental work treating the almost all doctrines and believes found in the world at his time and describing them objectively. This book is a great help for us to study the medieval religious and philosophical thought not only in Islamic world but in other places in the world.
- (6) The author here opposes the denial of the prophet quoting the Qur'ānic verses. "Their messenger said to them, we are no more than human beings like you, but the God bestows His grace to whom He wills of His slaves.----"(Chapter14, versell.) "----and we raised some of them above others in ranks, so that some may employ others in their work.----"(Chapter43, verse32.)
- (7) *Al-Mīlāl wa-l-niḥal*, vol. 2, p.253.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Refer to SAKAKI Kazuyo's 「アヴァターラ論考—異教世界との対立と共存—預言者性をめぐって」 in 『佛教学』(第47号、p.20.)
- (10) Ibid., pp.25-27. Sakaki is one of a few scholars who specialize the theological relationship between Sufism and Indian Buddhism.
- (11) *Kitāb al-tamhīd*, Ed. by 'Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar, Beirut, 1987, pp.126-156.
- (12) Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, He was an Ash'arī theologian and Mālikī jurisprudent who is said to systemize and popularize the Ash'arism. He is known to have developed the Atomism of al-Ash'arī into the Sunnite theology.
- (13) *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah* (Abd al-Jabbār, ed, by 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān, Cairo, 1965) pp.563-574. This

is a brief description on the Barāhimah who deny the prophecy. Cf., *Al-Mughnī*, vol.15, ed. by Maḥmūd al-Khuḍairī and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Qāsīm, Cairo, 1965, pp.109-115.

- (14) For further information for 'Abd al-Jabbār, see my work, *Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbār* (『イスラームの倫理—アブドゥル・ジャッバール研究—』 Miraisha, Tokyo, 2001).
- (15) Perfection of reason. When the human being is to be imposed obligation by the God, his reason should attain the stage of the perfection. Ibid., pp.78-84.
- (16) At the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studies in Koyasan, 2006, held 7th of September 2006, I met two Muslim scholars who made the presentations concerning the relation between Islam and Buddhism. It seemed to me that this is one of the bright signs for the new stage of inter-religious dialogue and studies toward the future.

As for the peaceful co-existence between Islam and Hindu in India, see this article, "The Dialogue between Islam and Hindu" (HOSAKA Shunji「イスラム教とヒन्दウー教との対話」)in *Toward the Inter-Civilization-Dialogue* (『文明間の対話に向けて』伊東俊太郎監修、世界思想社), Tokyo, 2001.