

Review of: "First Days after Death - A Jungian Comparison between the Beliefs of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Post-mortem Experiences in the Tibetan Bardo Plan"

Lucy Bregman¹

¹ Temple University

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This intriguing essay tries for a 3-way comparison among 3 rather exotic/esoteric traditions. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is by now familiar to many Westerners, however weird its content. C.J. Jung's psychology of individuation is also known, and devout Jungians have repeated and defended his ideas against many criticisms. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church's teachings on post-death experiences were completely unfamiliar to me. The author allows that these beliefs are a mix of official Orthodox doctrines and traditional Slav folk wisdom. The point of the essay is to illuminate the similarities and parallels among these three sources, without crushing them into one and only one mold.

An obvious difference is that the Tibetan and Orthodox materials claim to be about the experiences of the soul immediately after death and for a finite period (49 or 40 days) beyond. The experiences are exciting, dramatic, threatening- but basically hopeful, as a way to escape the dangers is provided. Jung, meanwhile, did not in his psychological practice and writings deal with eschatology, but with personal transformation as possible within this life. Nevertheless, there are, according to the author, enough striking similarities that Jung's psychology of individuation can be placed side by side with the other 2 sources, rather than serving as a (reductionist) explanation of them.

First, I'll say that the two traditions cover a topic that has not been given any attention in conventional Western Christianity. We do not have accounts, as far as I know, by Roman Catholics or Protestants of souls who do not know that they are dead, or who try desperately to return to their bodies. There is nothing special to be said about the days immediately following death, at least in the "official" views. Purgatory, the debated belief of the Reformation, did not include ideas such as this, and the arguments about it depended on other claims. So, in a way the Tibetan and Serb traditions fill a gap in conventional Western eschatologies. (According to Simcha Raphael, esoteric Judaism has some similar ideas about the "First Days After Death" but I'll leave this aside.) I'll return to this gap, and why it now is being filled, later in this review.

A major contribution to the study of *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is by Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*). He wrote the story of the book as a book, deconstructing the conventional story accepted by all of us who read the English translation and introductions to it. Lopez stated that it was never a "book" at all until the early 20th century translation process. It was a collection of varied texts, not necessarily used for funerals, edited and portrayed as if it were one with a consistent purpose and teaching. It is, therefore, as much a product of early 20th century esoteric

religiousness as it is of Tibet. It is therefore not surprising to find lots of parallels with Jung's thought; he too was part of a Western movement to discover (or rediscover or create) an alternative spiritual vision that would work for those disillusioned with conventional Christianity. Lopez also notes that the most distinctively Buddhist element in the Book is that the soul/self is unreal, unsubstantial, a fake foundation. This Buddhist teaching has always been difficult for non-Buddhists to swallow. *The Lotus and the Lion*, a wonderful study of Victorian England's appropriation of Buddhism by J. Jeffrey Franklin, also makes this point. No matter how enthusiastic Western interpreters have been toward other teachings of Buddhism, it is this doctrine of *anatman* which cannot be assimilated into Western esoteric and alternative religiousness.

Jung's interpretation of the Tibetan Book fits right into this pattern. He simply could not see that the Self archetype is, according to Buddhism, as un-substantial as the ego or the ordinary self. The present essay follows Jung and falls right into the same trap. The soul or Self is treated as the actor or all the posthumous encounters and adventures, as indeed it certainly is for the Serbs who speak of 22 "tollbooths" and the evil angels who control the soul's passage. There is no questioning of the metaphysical solidity of this being. As a consequence of the Buddhist perspective within the Tibetan Book (allowing that it may not truly be a "book" in its pre-20th century existence) the sad ending of the story is that the soul, still unwilling to recognize its non-substantiality, is drawn back into the world of rebirth. It perceives its future parents having sex- and down it goes, once more trapped in suffering and illusion. It has flubbed all its chances, available in the Bardo, to become free.

There is no equivalent in Jung's thought. It is even hard to imagine him writing up a case history of a patient who, on the very brink of individuation, chickened out and remained the same old neurotic personality as before therapy. Whether or not this actually happened, his writings do not include such a sad ending. (He did write of a person whom he believed suffered from a hidden psychosis, and therefore he discouraged them from even starting therapy.) Individuation may not be a completely spontaneous process, but it is not derailed by the continuing belief that something- the Self – is truly there, hidden within the archetypes of the collective unconscious. It is fair to say that on this point, Jung simply misread Buddhism – as Buddhists have repeatedly stated for a long time.

Now, back to the concern of why and how fascination with the posthumous experiences of the soul and especially the days immediately following death, has worked its way into many imaginative places. Why was a topic that was never even a seriously identified special topic traditionally, become popular? Heaven and Hell may have become too distant and too absolute for contemporary persons' imagination. Earlier Western understandings of reincarnation frequently used the idea of a "school," an educational progress that required multiple lifetimes. But so few of us remember useful lessons from our past lives, that this idea does not capture what so many of us hope for. Instead, many of us want some idea of a life-review, an opportunity to reflect, repent and revision who we really have been in our lives. The Bardo – an in-between place that is temporary – appeals to this desire. So, in several outstandingly imaginative contemporary novels, the Bardo realm is directly made part of the story. Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, has the murdered teen-ager spend time in "not-really-heaven" so as to deal with her own and her family's grief. Kim Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt* has his characters meet periodically in the Bardo to share their experiences through many incarnations, in the ongoing alternative history of the world. George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* is even more direct; its setting is the cemetery where the dead resolve

their emotional problems. No one is expected to take these literary uses of an intermediate place as literal serious beliefs. But they all work to tell stories that the more conventional Christian teachings cannot make room for. (I will add that my co-author Sara Thiermann and I, after writing a study of personal autobiographies of the terminally ill and their families, came up with “the Support Group for the Newly Dead.” There, the protagonists of all the books could meet and discuss what they had learned through dying, and what they still needed to resolve. This too filled the niche of the Bardo.) While there are guides in some of these fictional portrayals, there is no one authoritative “Voice of God,” as characters are mostly left to work through their issues, and figure out for themselves what is really happening. So I am suggesting that the new, contemporary context for imaginative dealing with death, dying and life-review makes use of traditional materials, however exotic these may still be, in ways that make personal, existential sense for persons today. We are willing to be flexible as to how much belief or disbelief we can set aside. Even when for us posthumous adventures of souls are not intended to be taken as serious religious commitments, as they undoubtedly were from Tibetans and Serbs. A Bardo realm serves as a kind of rehab program, before any of the newly dead are ready for an eternal destination.

One more comment on this: the closest traditional Western Christian parallel to the Orthodox Serbian “tollbooths” is, I think, found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Here, the traveller must encounter sin in its graphic and gruesome manifestations among the many classifications of the damned. His journey’s purpose is to see sin, recognize it in himself, and reject it so he can move on. He needs guides, naturally, who scold him when he feels too sorry for the sinful souls to learn the proper lesson from them. Dante did this so well, that Western Christians don’t need tollbooths or an elaborate post-death travelogue. He got to see it all and write it up as a living man, and the rest of us have continued to share and use *Divine Comedy* as a guidebook, as the 700th anniversary celebration for Dante made clear. So, if I had one additional source to include in this essay, this would be this.