

Classics of the Alcohol Literature

Old Russian Church Views on Inebriety

A LEGEND has it that St. Vladimir, the prince under whom Russia was converted to Christianity (988), rejected the doctrine of the Moslem missionaries on the ground that "drinking is a joy to Russia, we cannot do without it."

Exuberant as well as melancholic drinking have been media of expression of the Russian national character, and even the church had to shape its attitude toward drinking in accordance with the national attitude. Numerous old Russian sermons are known in which the idea of total abstinence is rejected as heretical. A preacher* of the fourteenth century stated:

"Not to drink at all is proscribed. For the holy fathers did not forbid us to drink and to eat within the law and at a fitting time, but they rejected overeating and drunkenness. For Satan neither ate nor drank, and he has fallen, while Paul, the Apostle, ate and drank and he rose to Heaven. And not to drink at all is an insult to the creation made by God. Drinking is joy for the wise; but for the unwise, who inebriate themselves often, it cannot be but sin. It is seemly to drink for those who are able to hide the drink within their belly and to retain bad words within their mouth."

On the other hand, the high social acceptance of alcohol inevitably brought with it serious abuses, and the alcohol problem was a grave one in Russia through the centuries. The social ambivalence toward alcohol, as an obstacle in the way of the prevention of inebriety, is conspicuous in the history of the Russian alcohol question. This ambivalence is freely reflected in the sermons of the early Orthodox Church. The gravity of the problem in the Russian Middle Ages is indicated by the fact that inebriety was one of the few vices to which entire sermons were dedicated, while other vices were usually dealt with collectively.

In contrast to the early writings against alcoholic beverages of other nations, which either do not mention moderate drinking or concede its

*"Sermon of the Holy Fathers on Drunkenness." Ms. No. 202, in the collection of the fourteenth century of the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery. Reprinted in: Ponomareff, A. I. *Pamiatniki drevne-russkoi tserkovno-uchitelnoi literatury*. (Monumenta of the Ancient Russian Instructional Church Literature.) St. Petersburg; Strannik, 1897, vol. 3, p. 102.

propriety in a few words, the Russian sermons dwell at length on the virtues of the moderate use of alcoholic beverages.

One of the most interesting of these sermons is attributed to St. Basil, who lived in the fourth century. By historical and philologic criteria, however, the sermon must be placed at the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century. Evidently it is not a Basilian document. It was common usage among the medieval Russian writers to cover their modest literary productions with the names of famous fathers of the church. Parts of this sermon are given here in translation, and to our knowledge this is the first rendering into English of the Russian text.

The social setting suggested by the author is that of the aristocratic circles of pre-Mongolian Russia. The banqueters are highly educated people, well-read in the Holy Scriptures, calling themselves "philosophers." Both laymen and the clergy take part in these feasts, as, indeed, it was a pious custom of princes to invite priests and monks to their festivities. The holy days of the church were, of course, the main occasions for such celebrations.

The kind of alcoholic beverage drunk on such occasions is rarely mentioned. The word "wine" was used traditionally to cover all alcoholic beverages, in accordance with the usage of the holy fathers of the church, although grapewine was extremely rare in Russia, since it had to be imported from Greece or from Western Europe for the use of the church and the upper classes. The domestic beverages were mead, "braga" or "pivo," the latter two being equivalents of beer. Honey-mead in particular was highly appreciated. Due to the popularity of this beverage, apiculture was one of the main branches of Russian rural industry.

It is safe to assume that the beverage referred to, in the sermon which follows, was honey-mead, which may have contained roughly 12 per cent of alcohol by volume. Since the cups in use at the time of the sermon had a capacity of approximately 8 ounces, the "three cups" which were prescribed by the fathers, and which were regarded as moderate amounts, would have contained about 3 ounces of absolute alcohol, or the equivalent of 6 ounces (3 glasses) of whisky. The 7 cups to which the preacher refers as highly intoxicating may have contained the alcohol equivalent of 1 pint of whisky.

Aside from its value as a social document, the sermon offers some passages of psychologic interest. Among these is the description of the pseudointellectual conversation when the limits of moderate drinking

have just been passed. The text which follows is translated from "The Sermon of St. Basil the Great on How it Is Seemly to Abstain from Drunkenness."*

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ON HOW IT IS SEEMLY TO ABSTAIN FROM DRUNKENNESS

Translated from the Russian by Vera Efron

Much is written about it in the canons of the holy fathers. For the wise, this advice will be sufficient; as for the unwise, even if they were taught from all the books of the Scriptures, they would neither believe nor heed it. And if you do not believe the Scripture, think of your malodorous and shameful deeds of drunkenness with which you sin against God and anger Him. Indeed, you drink many drinks with *troparia*.† Humbleness, peace and comfort prevail at first; silence before the elder, obedience toward the wise. Eating and drinking is orderly during the meal. After everyone has drunk according to the commandment of the holy fathers, who have prescribed three cups‡ for the orthodox, one begins to pick and choose among the dishes, refusing some in preparation for [more] drinking.

When the fourth cup is drunk, which is of the fiend, even that chosen dish is set aside and wise conversation begins. Everyone converses according to his own spiritual need. Some like to be instructed, and seek out wise philosophers; and the philosophers prepare their tongues for answers. They throw the fishline of the word into the depth of divine wisdom; they spread the net of the Holy Scriptures into the sea of the spiritual fishes. They sharpen their thoughts to bring to the foolish the knowledge of the truth. The great lords collect their minds and extend their love to all: mercy to the beggars, affection to their household, help to the sick and the poor. They want to be honored and they strive to the highest. And what is the use of wasting many words? Everyone behaves according to his state: The spiritual fathers instruct their sons in the ways of salvation, call to repentance, show the road to celestial Jerusalem. And the simple people, too, all speak according to their needs.

When the seventh cup is drunk—the God-offending, spirit-blaspheming, angel-repelling, demon-rejoicing cup—then the angel departs from each

**Slovo Sviatogo velikogo Vassilija o tom, kak podobaiet vzderjatsia ot pianstva*. From the Collection of the Moral Sermons and Admonitions of the Twelfth Century of the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery. Reprinted in: Ponomareff, A. I. Op. cit., p. 95.

†A pious feature of high class banquets was the singing of *troparia*, or ecclesiastical hymns, appropriate to the particular feast day. Each such hymn was accompanied, like our toasts, by a new cup. The author of this sermon did not approve of the spreading of this custom, as he states later: "What benefit is there to him who drinks wine with the *troparia*? When he is drunk he does not remember the *troparia*. . . . Even if one sings them in the Church in a sober mood, they do not cause tears; and sung amidst drunkenness, what does the *troparion* create? Is it not sin? Is it not torture?"

‡The classical measure of 3 cups during a meal may be found in many monastic rules (e.g., St. Benedict's), and was also recommended for laymen.

person and the demon approaches. And each demon will suggest his special temptation: One, envy and slander; another, quarrels and insult and hair pulling; another, bloodshed and murder; and another, lechery and fornication and every profligation and shame; and still others, pride and conceit, demoniac games, songs and dances. And what is the use of wasting many words: they will perform every satanic device, every demoniac perfidy, and will pollute with their stench the cup of every man.

When man has drunk the demon-cup, all his inwards will ignite and his belly will burn; his throat will be parched, his spittle will dry out, the lips will stick together, the mouth will foam, the body will be aflame and the face afire. The tongue will be wooden, the throat will harden, the sight will wane from the eyes. The strength of his mind will weaken. And then the man will begin to fight with the *bmel** as with an enemy on the battlefield. At times he will get the better of it and will then sit upon his chair like a prince returned from a victory. And he will then open his mouth, hankering for the cup, not knowing his measure. And his body will be soaked with *bmel*, like a sponge with water. And his strength will weaken, his veins become exhausted, his joints will loosen, his feet will wobble, and he will look wildly and speak insanely, in no way differing from one who has lost his mind. And the devil will fulfill all his wishes on that man.

There are also other drunkards who need no demon, and to whom the demon pays no heed; they are demons to themselves, drinking through the matins and the canonic hours and the time of prayers. O man! What dost thou do, ruining thy mind with disorderly living, showing a wicked liking for the customs of the heathens. For it is the joy of the heathen to drink without measure, while for the orthodox Christian it is prescribed: when you have eaten, then you shall drink.

And now we see many who sit all day long wasting in drink the time of repentance; unable to make any effort, either spiritual or bodily, but giving up their soul to drink and exhausting their body. Wonderful it is, indeed, that a man is fed in an hour, but wastes a whole day by drinking. I believe that the cattle and the wild beasts—which know not God, nor are concerned with practical affairs, nor hope for eternal life, being devoid of all—even they mock us. Although they do not speak, being dumb, they say,

**Hmel* (Russian for hops) was employed in the fermentation of honey, as well as other substances, and was considered to be the essential intoxicating element of alcoholic beverages. Colloquially, and in Russian poetry, *bmel* is used as a symbol for intoxication and of the power of alcohol. The word and its derivatives are interchangeable with the words for drunkenness. In folk tales *bmel* is often personified. In a sermon of the fifteenth century attributed to St. Cyril the philosopher (Op. cit., p. 286) *bmel*, the plant, is said to be boasting: "In this way *bmel* speaks to every man; not only to the simple man, but also to monks and priests, to kings and princes, to the rich and the poor, and to the beggars, to women, young and old: I am *bmel*, most powerful in the world, more than any other fruit in the world; of high descent, from a mighty family, created by God out of my blessed mother. I have long legs, but not strong ones, and my belly is unmeasurable. My arms hold the whole earth, and my head is high; my mind is equal to none, but disorderly; my tongue is multiloquious; my eyes are shameless."

verily: "We, the dumb beasts, eat and drink here and do not hope for eternal life beyond, but these insatiable men, as though they had one belly for eating and another for drinking, pour as into a broken vessel, until they become rabid with drunkenness."

There are two kinds of drunkenness; one is praised by many people who say [of the other]: "A true drunkard is the one who does not go to sleep, but who pushes, fights and swears." But if you want to know the exact truth, listen to how a meek drunkard angers God. What shall I call a meek drunkard? A beast? But he is beastlier than that; shall I call him a swine? But he is more swinish than that. He is as dead, neither dead nor alive, swollen like a log, wallowing in filth. He stinks, having wetted himself, and he is stained by his vomit, disgusting to himself. Throughout the holy feast days he lies unable to move, weakened in body, filled like a skin to the throat, like a barrel ready to burst, having drowned his heart in drink and having ruined his mind with *bmel*. Such a drunkard differs in no way from the heathen. Be silent, you who speak thus: If I get drunk and sleep quietly, I shall do no wrong! See what evil you do, wasting the holy days in drink. Together with the rich man [of the Gospel], the man who drinks immeasurably, even though he be meek, will seek to cool his tongue in the [eternal] fire, but in vain.

The insolent drunkard harms not only himself, but many others as well. What shall I call him? A wild beast? But he is wilder than that. Shall I call him possessed? But he is worse than that. He reviles, he vituperates, annoys and harasses the devout and God-fearing people. If he is a mighty lord, he is doubly harmful: he boasts, he drives [people] away, he wants to make all guilty of his own wickedness, for he fears their accusations and their condemnations. He detests the devout and loves only his like, who by encouraging him will go down into eternal fire. . . .