What modern theology called ‘historicity’ (Geschichtlichkeit) is a fundamental dimension of Christianity’s – and the West’s – Jewish heritage. But as an element of Western consciousness this awareness of history and its significance for the institutions of society, the doctrines of religion and much else is also a social construct, and a relatively recent one. It is a reflexive awareness, a distancing and objectifying of past events as ‘facts’ which at the same time isolates and identifies the observer’s standpoint as one among possible others. This awareness brings history in all its contingency and messiness to bear on the constitution of the self, the origins of institutions and doctrines and the course of their development through time. It also reveals that the sense of history and its significance is by no means the same or even present in every culture. The so-called ‘primal’ traditions of indigenous peoples deal with history through the oral transmission of elaborate stories about culture heroes and their activities as they shaped the world and its inhabitants in illo tempore, in a ‘time beyond time’ or ‘everywhen’ such as the Dreaming (alcheringa) of Australian Aboriginal peoples, also known as their Law.¹ This normally falls under the heading ‘myth’ and is therefore discounted as having any ‘historical’ value in the sense of verifiable fact, yet oral history is the foundation of all historical narrative, as has been realised in cultures to which literacy came late. Here scholars need to develop new techniques to retrieve the memories of the past transmitted by oral tradition.² Similar processes may be seen in the long evolution of the Hebrew Bible, with its multitude of genres and its sometimes contradictory accounts of what must have been in some sense historical events, and the often controversial attempts to introduce critical methods into biblical scholarship.


² See Donald Denoon and Roderic Lacey, eds., Oral Tradition in Melanesia (Port Moresby: The University of Papua New Guinea and the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1981), especially the chapters by Carl Loeliger on the parallels with Old Testament study and the concluding overview by Roderic Lacey.
If historicity is recoverable in the Jewish traditions that flowed into Christianity, it is generally regarded as being completely absent in the Indic traditions which formed the matrix of Buddhism. This rather drastic judgement, like the simplistic opposition between ‘cyclic’ and ‘linear’ views of history as characterising Greek and Hebrew consciousness respectively, has been criticised and modified, but there is no denying a profound difference in the status of historical awareness in the two cultural worlds, the Indic and the Greco-Judaic. This becomes apparent when we note that Hinduism’s re-awakening to its own past as a history of the development of ideas in determinate social contexts was sparked off by India’s encounter with the West with its curiosity about origins and its scepticism of received accounts. In the persons of reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy and Vivekananda this resulted in a fertile fusion of Vedāntic heritage and European philosophy.

Something similar to the Hindu revival also occurred in Buddhism in comparable circumstances. Relations between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka (colonial Ceylon), in particular, were often rancorous and sometimes took the form of public polemics and debates. These were almost exclusively doctrinal; but on a more pragmatic level the Buddhists had no hesitation in adopting the methods used so effectively by Christian propaganda, such as the printing of pamphlets, and in developing an apologetics which claimed that Buddhism from its earliest origins had been all that modern Christianity claimed to be: historical, verifiable, rational and critical. In the process, Buddhists came to appreciate their own Indian heritage; the sacred sites of the Buddha’s life, mentioned so often in the canon, were restored and became places of pilgrimage, especially after they were visited by Sir Edwin Arnold.

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6 An example of this is the eminently reasonable exposition by K.N. Jayatilleke, *The Message of the Buddha*, edited posthumously by Ninian Smart (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975); a considerably more polemical, though sharply argued, approach is that of Jayatilleke’s student Gunapala Dharmasiri, *Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Colombo: Lake House, 1974).
author of *The Light of Asia*, and restored at the instigation of Anagārika Dharmapāla, founder of the Mahā Bodhi Society.  

More ominously, the great chronicles of the island of Laṅkā, the *Dīpavamsa* and the *Mahāvamsa*, were seen, in the light of the nationalisms that sustained Western imperialism, as sources of a religio-ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. Today, senior Western Buddhists seem to be becoming increasingly alarmed by the tendency among Western converts to Buddhism, often highly educated in literary and historical criticism, to abandon their critical faculties and enthusiastically embrace the mythological legitimations of their particular lineages proposed by their Asian spiritual masters. It should be noted, of course, that Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, long resisted the Enlightenment’s discovery of historicity, especially the notion that religious truth could be subject to historical and sociological conditioning, a tension that is still at the root of much controversy in the area of interreligious dialogue and religious pluralism.

The purpose of this essay is not to go into these historical arguments in further detail, but to point out that underlying them, in whatever tradition they occur (think of present-day Muslims encountering Western scholarship!), is the mystery of time. Here, it seems, there is indeed a stark contrast between Buddhist and Christian

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9 This became strikingly apparent at the eighth conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, St Ottilien, Germany, 11-15 June 2009, particularly in the introductory paper by Rita Gross, who exhorted Buddhists to take their own teaching of impermanence (*anicca*) seriously and develop a non-sectarian history of Buddhism which does not cling to culturally determined characteristics of particular sub-traditions (the proceedings of the conference will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*). The previous conference of the Network, on Buddhist attitudes to other religions, saw discussion of similar concerns, see Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist Attitudes*, especially the contributions of Peter Harvey and Schmidt-Leukel, on which I shall draw in what follows.
conceptions of time which I shall now attempt to sketch briefly. Buddhism, one could say, is fundamentally atemporal. The saṃsāric cycle is in principle endless, as is the succession of kalpas or world-ages within which it continually manifests itself. Final liberation (mokṣa, mokkha) severs all bonds with the karmic process which, akin to a law of nature, sustains the circle of rebirth (saṃsāra). The outcome of liberation in the reality-beyond-reality called nirvāṇa or nibbāna is strictly speaking ineffable, beyond the reach of language and conceptual thought; as the Sutta-Nipāta (1076) puts it with admirable simplicity: “When all conditions are removed / All ways of telling are removed”, and the Buddha teaches in the same vein: “A monk whose mind is thus released cannot be followed and tracked out even by the gods” (Majjhima-Nikāya I, 135).

It is possibly for this reason that successive spiritual movements and schools of thought in Buddhism, as it moved out of India to permeate virtually the whole of Asia, had no compunction in producing scriptures to legitimate their particular teachings, attributing them to Gautama Śākyamuni as the historical Buddha, even though they arose centuries after his death. In India the key to this hermeneutical feat was the technique known as skilful or expedient means (kauśalya-upāya), which allowed the Mahāyānists, when they emerged around the beginning of the Common Era, to claim that Gautama had deliberately withheld certain advanced teachings because of the limited capacity of his early hearers (meaning contemporary adherents of what became known as the Hinayāna or ‘lesser vehicle’), revealing them only now to disciples of superior spiritual attainments. This is patently evident in the Lotus Sūtra with its disparaging remarks about arhats or purportedly enlightened ones. The Chinese, puzzled by the variety of competing schools they inherited from India, rationalised this plurality by drawing up tables of schools in order of esteem (with their own lineage, of course, at the top) and assigning different stages of the disclosure of the dharma to different periods in the life of Gautama. The upshot seems to have been an utterly arbitrary approach to the authenticity of texts and the historicity of their origins and interpretations.

Notwithstanding this all-pervasive atemporality and ahistoricity of Buddhist traditions, a complex but coherent narrative of the Buddha’s life was meticulously preserved, allowing us to reconstruct his deeds and words in their north Indian context.
with all the abundant detail provided by the Pāli and other canons. Though it is generally agreed that it is impossible to compose a biography of Gautama (any more than we can have a reliable biography of Jesus), the outlines of an ‘historical Buddha’ definitely emerge from the abundance of evidence handed down by oral tradition for about five centuries before being incorporated into the written canon.¹⁰ More importantly, there is a case for developing what might be called a ‘narrative Buddhology’¹¹ using this framework, including the Jātakas or ‘birth stories’ of the Buddha’s previous lives and the Bodhisattvas or ‘Enlightenment beings’ on the threshold of Nirvāṇa who renounce their own final liberation out of compassion (karunā) for beings still trapped in ignorance (avidyā, avijjā) and the limitations of a transitory existence (dukkha, anicca). Here we sense not only what one author has called the “karmic depth”¹² of the Buddha narrative with its cosmic scope, but something like a teleology which might be developed into a full-blown eschatology.

What this means for our present project is that we must bring together what we have been calling ‘historicity’ and ‘narrativity’, the particular linguistic structuring of texts which links events occurring over time into a meaningful succession, otherwise known as ‘emplotment’. This concept of plot or muthos derives from Aristotle’s mimēsis, yielding not only the idea of narrative as a textually constructed world but


also that of ‘narrated time’ as a structuring of the life-world of the reader.\textsuperscript{13} Emplotment, indeed, according to Paul Ricoeur, is the key to the relationship between time and narrative:

… my basic hypothesis is that between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, \textit{time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.}\textsuperscript{14}

Ricoeur explains this as a refiguration of our temporal experience by this constructed time. \textit{We are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time.}\textsuperscript{15}

These are the three dimensions of \textit{mimēsis} that allow the significance of stories to engage with the significance of existence. The first, the prefiguration of meaning in the text, might be called a semantics of action, for as its inner entelechy is disclosed through the second dimension, emplotment, it becomes the symbolic mediation of action, and according to the ordering of its temporal elements it reveals goals and motives which raise questions about who is acting and why. “In passing from the paradigmatic order of action to the syntagmatic order of narrative, the terms of the semantics of action acquire integration and actuality”.\textsuperscript{16} Narrative thus supplies symbolic resources for the practical field, making the private public and action ‘readable’.\textsuperscript{17} Referring to Heidegger’s category of ‘within-time-ness’ (Innerzeitigkeit),


\textsuperscript{14} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative} 1, 52.

\textsuperscript{15} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative} 1, 54.

\textsuperscript{16} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative} 1, 56.

\textsuperscript{17} See Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative} 1, 56-58.
Ricoeur points out that this involves more than the ‘flattened time’ of a mere succession of ‘nows’. It is irreducible to linear time or even ‘historicality’ (Geschichtlichkeit); it implies rather the existential now represented by Heidegger’s primary category Sorge, the care or concern immanent in Dasein once it is grasped as ‘being-towards-death’ (Sein zum Tode).\(^ {18} \) “To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality”\(^ {19} \), and it is out of this preunderstanding that Ricoeur’s second type of mimēsis arises, “the kingdom of the as if”, organising and configuring events into “a synthesis of the heterogeneous” through the poiēsis of emplotment to achieve the ‘followability’ which is the key to story-telling.\(^ {20} \) Narrativity, even as fiction, has its own kind of reference: arising in being, it sheds light on being, and its reception demands a fusion of horizons, the text’s and the reader's; if poetry redescribes the world, narrative resignifies the world.\(^ {21} \)

This analysis gives us a terminology with which to investigate the narrativity implicit in both Buddhist and Christian traditions, not only in the accounts of their origins but throughout their subsequent development. The earliest New Testament writings, in keeping with their Hebrew cultural matrix, are structured around promise and fulfilment, pointing to an imminent historical outcome of apocalyptic proportions. As the Church took shape and found its place in the multi-cultural Mediterranean societies of the first century CE, this eschatological immediacy became modified in the Gospel stories, especially in Luke and Acts, into an abiding expectation of a coming end of both historical and cosmic time. In the stories of Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit, his baptism in the same Spirit, his miracles and the cataclysmic events surrounding his death on the cross, the transcendent reference to the God whom he reveals in his own person is present from the beginning, but only in the tension between the ‘already’ of the Christian life of grace and the ‘not yet’ of its final fulfilment. The Buddha legend lacks this theme of anticipation. Release from the coils

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\(^ {19} \) Ricoeur, Time and Narrative 1, 63.

\(^ {20} \) Ricoeur, Time and Narrative 1, 64-66.

\(^ {21} \) See Ricoeur, Time and Narrative 1, 78, 81.
of *saṃsāra* is already achieved by the Buddha and occurs instantaneously in the conversion stories. After the Buddha’s definitive passing into *nirvāṇa*, however (i.e., his death or *parinirvāṇa*), the monks, nuns and lay followers are left with questions about the reality of *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha’s continued accessibility and the status of liberated ones still living (*jīvanmukti*). These might be described as incipient structures of expectation, in tension with the Buddhist goal of the extirpation of all desire, even the desire for liberation. They laid the foundation for the full flowering of the Bodhisattva ideal and the powerful symbol of a Pure Land or Buddha realm in the west into which even humble layfolk might hope to be released through devotion to the transcendent Buddha Amida (Amitābha) or the mediation of the compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

One significant difference, however, is that whereas Christianity was conceived entirely within the medium of the “history-like” Biblical stories,22 combining storytelling (*Bericht*) with the praise of God (*Anrede*) and yielding genres such as law, prophecy, wisdom sayings and hymns,23 Buddhism, from the very beginning, was couched in an already existing quasi-philosophical terminology, most highly developed in the *Upaniṣads* and intensely debated by the Buddha’s contemporaries in a way that calls to mind the philosophical schools of ancient Greece. The Buddha, too, taught in parables and illustrative stories, but the main content of the *Sutta-Piṭaka* (*‘The Basket of the Sūtras’, i.e. the collection of teaching discourses*) is subtle psychological analysis of the human condition, empirically based and logically argued. Always presupposing the power of the Enlightened One’s personality and the authenticity of his testimony, and mindful of his constant teaching that deductions from ‘theories’ or ‘views’ (*diṭṭhī*) are irrelevant to the work of purification that brings about release (*mokkha*), it is nevertheless the force of these arguments that again and again precipitates the liberating insight that brings about the conversion of his listeners. In Jesus’ case, again allowing for his compelling personal presence, it is the paradoxes structurally encoded in his incomparable parables that ‘turn people’s minds around’ (*metanōia*). Instead, then, in Ricoeur’s apt phrase, of “extracting anemic

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23 Ricoeur, *Figuring*, 246.
generalities” from the biblical stories as the starting point of a speculative theology, a narrative theology would work with the narrative structures of the stories themselves. My proposal is that this would be equivalently possible in the Buddhist context as well as we master the art of what Ricoeur calls “metaphorizing the narrative and narrativizing the metaphor”.

Attempts have indeed been made to conceive of narrative composition as interpretation, uniting the kerygmatic and the narrative in theology as narrative structure, notably in liberation theology’s rediscovery of ‘people’s religion’ and political theology’s use of textual linguistics. In terms of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophical strategy, this amounts to the admittedly never fully achievable task of surprising the act of saying (le dire) before it becomes enmeshed in the particularities of the said (le dit), a task, nonetheless, on which the historian, the linguist and the systematic theologian or buddhologist could collaborate.

These reflections on narrativity still only scratch the surface of the role played by time in each of the traditions. Thanks to St Augustine’s penetrating analysis of time as distentio animi, a temporal succession in the mind, the problem of time is ever-present to Christian thought. The individuality of human life and the particularity of events and movements in history derive their intensity from the fact that they are bounded by time. Hapax – once only – is the Leitmotif of Christian existence (see Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:10), reminding us both of the responsibility accruing to each moral act and the uniqueness of the Christ event as the turning point of all history. The entire structure of Christian faith is determined by its continuity with the story of creation (protology), the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as prefigured by the history of Israel and its prophets (Christology), and the outcome towards which this cosmic

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24 Ricoeur, Figuring, 237.
25 Ricoeur, Figuring, 159.
26 For the former, see Ricoeur, Figuring, 183, and for the latter, see his recapitulation of the categories developed by Harald Weinrich: erzählte/besprochene Welt, Aktzeit/Textzeit, Erzählzeit/erzählte Zeit, Time and Narrative, Vol. 2 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 67, 70, 73, 77.
27 Augustine’s concept of time, together with Aristotle’s account of plot, forms the starting point of Ricoeur’s analysis, see Time and Narrative 1, chapter 1.
and historical drama is heading (eschatology). The symbolic structure of the act of faith and the life of grace is thus deeply embedded in this narrative framework.

Buddhists, as far as I can see, do not relate to the historical Buddha Gautama Śākyamuni or to the transcendent Buddhas and Bodhisattvas evolved by tradition in quite the same way. The legends of the Buddha’s previous births, his childhood and youth as the predestined Enlightened One of this world age, and the 40 years of public teaching culminating in his peaceful death serve to inspire, but the two pivotal points of his Enlightenment (bodhi) and his definitive passing into Nirvāṇa (parinirvāṇa) are all that really matters; more precisely: the content of the teachings whose authenticity they guarantee. Those branches of Buddhism for which scriptures are important embellish these legends endlessly with unabashedly mythological elements. Other Buddhist traditions, however, such as some of those inspired by Zen, dispense with scriptures altogether, studiously avoid any reference to or dependence on the historical Buddha, and derive their continuity from the transmission of the enlightenment experience (satori) by those qualified to recognise it.

The preoccupation with working towards one’s own release in the Theravāda and the invocation of the Bodhisattvas’ compassion as an efficacious means (‘other-power’, tariki) of arriving at the Pure Land in Amida Buddhism can seem to give the quasi-ontological ‘not-self’ teaching (anattā, nothing into which the constituents of existence can be analysed yields knowledge of a ‘self’ or ‘substance’ underlying appearances) an egotistical twist towards self-perfection, subtly different from more ethically orientated Christian ‘selflessness’. The utterly transcendent standpoint achieved by one’s own efforts (‘own-power’, jiriki) in satori appears to imply complete acceptance of everything as it is (‘suchness’, tathatā) – and utter indifference to it. What Zen Buddhists call the ‘return’ from transcendence to action, from Nirvāṇa to history, from the absolute truth (paramārthasatya) attained in enlightenment to the relative or conventional truth (samvṛtisatya) of everyday living in the world becomes problematic, in particular because the basis for an ethic seems to disappear.28 Buddhism, of course, in almost all its variants, is the most ethical of

religions, but the dimension of non-dualism, which becomes more prominent in the Mahāyāna, extends to a level beyond – or more precisely: prior to – good and evil.\textsuperscript{29} If the perfect naturalness (jinen) of the liberated prevailed, there would be no need for ethical codes or monastic rules. By the same token, all that occurs – whether it be the heroic sacrifice of the Bodhisattva or the fathomless evil of the Holocaust – occurs naturally and inevitably when viewed from a higher (lokuttara) perspective, though in this-worldly (lokiya) or conventional terms it may appear to be supremely good or evil.\textsuperscript{30} This stance of Abe Masao understandably aroused sharp controversy with Christians involved in dialogue with Jews, not to mention Jews themselves, but as a limit case it forces us to confront the implications of absolute transcendence, as symbolised in the religions, for ethics.

Pure Land Buddhism had its own strategies for coming to terms with evil, which went to the extent of giving priority to the evil person as the recipient of Amida’s efficacious help and effectively cancelling out the evil deed.\textsuperscript{31} Both approaches, the Zen and the Pure Land, take us well beyond the simple injunction ‘Do good and avoid evil’ which characterised earlier traditional Buddhism. They do challenge the practitioner to confront the evil in our nature, but only as a step on the way to discovering the ‘original enlightenment’ or ‘inherent awakening’ (hongaku homon) of our True Self, which is our eternal and transcendent Buddha-nature (bussho, buddhadhātu).\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{32} Repp, “Problem of ‘Evil’”, 162-165, elucidates this in the light of Hōnen’s radical teaching (often attributed only to Shinran), “Even good persons attain birth, how much more evil persons”, 160.
There is much in these developments that reminds Christians of the centuries-long controversies about Law and Gospel, faith and works, grace and free will. What is lacking in Christianity is the radical non-dualism for which, in the end, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, *karma* (deeds and their residue) and *mokṣa* (liberation from the law of *karma*) are identical. If ways could be found to adopt this without losing the central belief in a personal God who creates the world and intervenes to heal and redeem it, Christian faith could be immeasurably strengthened and purged of the literal interpretation of so much of its symbolism.\(^{33}\) Powerful as the non-dualist perspective is, it leaves us with serious questions about the reality of evil deeds and their retribution. If the enormities of a Stalin, Hitler or Mao in the end have no consequences in some ultimate and definitive sense, then the enduring value of the good is also called into question. This, indeed, is the whole point of Christian eschatology: the quasi-mythical images of a Last Judgement enshrine the supremely important insight that we must take full responsibility for our deeds and that the whole creation is groaning with the pangs of a final, cosmic rebirth which will include “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:18-23), for “in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom 8:28). The Christian narrative, in other words, is defined by time, and though it has its own ways of preserving the absolute transcendence of the divine love at its core (“for God is love”, 1 John 4:8), its starting point is the Incarnation of the Word which reveals that love – in time: “And the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us” (John 1:14). The Buddhist story, by contrast, seems to imply a flight from the temporal, which, though it starkly emphasises transcendence as the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) at the heart of all that passes for reality, makes the journey back to moral judgement amidst the contingencies of temporal existence in the messiness of history extremely difficult.

It is this, perhaps, that underlies the failures of Japanese Zen masters and practitioners to come to grips with the ethical outrage of militarism and imperialism in the inter-war period, just as there is something deeply troubling about the failure of the Theravāda *nikāyas* (sects or monastic schools) in Sri Lanka to challenge the appalling ethnocentricity of violent anti-Tamil nationalism. But every tradition has its dark side.

\(^{33}\) A bold and unusually honest attempt to do this is Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009).
The reciprocal violence of Hindus and Muslims in India, of Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, and of Christians and Muslims in many parts of Asia and Africa are sufficient testimony to that. The relationship between the sense of transcendence which gives religious teachings their capacity to convince and console and the violence to which they can lead on account of these very convictions has not been sufficiently explored. My hope is that greater attention to the connections between temporality, narrativity and historicity might allow such an exploration to make progress.

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