

# The Search for the Historical Śākyamuni in Light of the Historical Jesus

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One of the avid enterprises of Christian theologians in the nineteenth century was the search for the historical Jesus. Not by coincidence, one of the modern Buddhist controversies in Japan since the Meiji enlightenment is whether Mahāyāna can be considered as the teaching of the historical Buddha or not. Directly and indirectly, the liberal humanism at the heart of the theological quest for the pristine gospel or the Jesus-of-history had so induced the progressive Japanese Buddhists to pose the same quest within their own tradition.

The Western search had tentatively come to an end when Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) offered a classic review of “The Search for the Historical Jesus,” first published in German in 1906. He exposed, on the one hand, the various presuppositions of the searchers, the easy lure of reading nineteenth century theological fashions into Jesus’ teachings, while on the other hand, he recovered an early Christian worldview *sitz-in-leben*—an ardent eschatological expectation. (Ironically, this idea of the imminent end of the world seriously questioned the whole notion of “history” itself.)

The Eastern search for the historical Śākyamuni has also generally ended. The problem is now passé and the suggestion that Śākyamuni never taught the Mahāyāna *sūtras* as tradition claimed hardly raises an eyebrow among those instructed in the faith. However, the dissolution of the problem in the East is quite different from the Western attempts, which are still going on, at resolving theirs. So the following essay will briefly analyze the Western induction of the East into this historical search. However, since by the very nature of the Christian faith, this search poses a more urgent problem to it than a comparable one would to Buddhism, the eventual reactions to the enterprise, West and East, are scrutinized so as to help us appreciate some basic orientational differences.

## THE IMPORTATION OF A WESTERN PROBLEM INTO AN EASTERN CONTEXT

The Meiji Restoration brought Western learning into Japan, and in time Buddhist scholars were drawn also into this intellectual ferment. One should not say that theological fashions influenced Buddhological reflections. For all practical purposes, the kind of Christian scholarship that might have come through the missionaries was indirect or well-nigh unregistered. Rather, the Christian influence came as part of the larger, liberal rationalist outlook so embedded in certain shared presuppositions among students of religion at the time. It came largely as a historical problem of how to locate the original—and therefore the true—teaching of the founder of any religion.

In Europe the search for the historical Jesus was primarily a Protestant enterprise, especially a German Lutheran one. It was not surprising. The Lutheran Reformation as a whole was more history-conscious than the Papal tradition it sought to dethrone. In arguing for his having tapped the early pristine gospel prior to its corruption by the Roman "Babylonian captivity," Luther had to justify his reading of the tradition as being more historically true, that is, closer to the original teachings of the primitive Church. This gave an impetus to historical research and critical appraisal of ecclesiastical lore hitherto reported and accepted as fact. The four gospels were studied and compared, the discrepancies noted and questions raised about their true authors. This cautious biblical criticism grew, in time, into the highly disciplined "higher criticism" seeking to separate the strata, documents, sources, forms, and the redactions of the gospel writers. These we may regard as part of the objective, historical enterprise in modern Western self-understanding which oriental Buddhist scholarship could learn and benefit from.

However, the historical search was accompanied by certain theological premises. There was, first of all, the assumption that Truth is truer at its beginning; the earliest is somehow the best. There was also the assumption that the beginning can be easily found. In nineteenth century liberal theology, this also had a Christocentric bias. As Karl Barth would say in retrospect, this is forgetting the centrality of the Christological dogma, a confusion of God-initiated Revelation with man-created Religion. The nineteenth century Schleiermacher, for example, was ready to grant Christianity the status of a religion among other religions, but one in which even for this romantic the lofty ethical ideals instead of irrational dogmas can be, with reason, shown to be the best. The focus is thus put upon the teaching of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, and less so on the teaching about Jesus—the proclamation that he was Christ. Often, Christianity is presented in accordance with humanistic ethics and little more; the historical Jesus was decked, as it were, in rational, liberal gowns. This way, original Christianity was seen as compatible with modernity. The doctrine of mankind's sin-wretchedness, which was not in keeping with the then current

optimism about human potential and progress, was blamed, for example, on Paul's undue pessimism, just as superstitious elements contrary to science were deemed accidental misunderstandings overlaid on the core moral message or "essence."<sup>1</sup> These theological assumptions might not have been known directly to the Japanese, but they were part of the new rational humanism the Meiji enlightenment offered to the more receptive Buddhists.

The Japanese Buddhists could not ignore a powerful new reading of Buddhism coming from the West either. Western scholars, not without some personal spiritual investments, were discovering Eastern religions to their liking. Just as the theosophists helped to revive modern Hinduism, Mrs. T. W. Rhys Davids contributed to the revitalization of the Pali (Hīnayāna) tradition. She brought along with her, however, both Christian and modern Western presuppositions. On the Christian side, it is well-known that she insisted that the Buddha never taught a no-soul (*anātman*) doctrine. She was also sure that Pali Buddhism represented the earliest teachings of the Buddha. Sharing the assumption that "truth lies in the beginning," she took this pristine gospel to be the true teaching.<sup>2</sup> Not only that, that tradition was shown by her to be in accord with the best rationality itself with little of the supernaturalism and dogmatism that proverbially always came afterwards. Buddhism is the answer to the spiritual poverty of the West. The study of Pali Buddhism may not have, even now, a large following in traditionally Mahāyānist Japan, but the thesis of Mrs. Rhys Davids concerning the authenticity of Pali Buddhism, which by inference brought suspicion on the status of Mahāyāna, was something that Japanese Buddhists could not ignore. How much this defamation of Mahāyāna was transmitted through the polemics of missionaries I cannot tell, but Christians who claim a historical root to their faith in their founder were naturally disposed to mocking Mahāyāna myths about the *sūtras* being historic words of the Buddha. Such fabricated *sūtras* of a later time could not be "true."

In this way, the Christian interest in origins made an impact on Japanese Buddhists. There was a call (a) for more historical scholarship (b) to show how Mahāyāna *sūtras* stand as records of the pristine gospel, and (c) preferably to demonstrate its compatibility with the best that Reason and humanistic Ethics can offer. Mahāyāna would be seen best as being continuous with the Buddha's rationality.

#### EARLY JAPANESE RESPONSE AND CONTROVERSY

After centuries of traditional scholarship known as *shūgaku* (sectarian learning, largely exegetical) in the Tokugawa period, Japanese Buddhist scholars confronted modernity.<sup>3</sup> In the end, they were more receptive than any other Mahāyāna country to date. Inoue Enryō (1858–1919) is the father of modern Buddhism. The question of the authenticity of Mahāyāna did not occur to him, but he demonstrated the new liberal concern as he sought to make a dead, clois-

tered tradition a living faith for the new era. In spirit, he wanted to repeal the sectarian schism in traditional Buddhism and to seek out the one essence behind all seeming differences. He embodied the faith that Truth indeed lies at the origin and that so much of the deadwood of tradition was due to later, unwise insertions. Openly and confidently he said he would “trust in what accords with the philosophic reason of today” and discard what simply does not so accord.<sup>4</sup> What accords with today’s reason turned out to be what was rational and humanistic. One thing modern reason was able to do without was the superstitious reliance on a god, so Inoue, like many anti-Christian Buddhists, took pride in Buddhist atheism as the most rational form of faith. With him, Japanese Buddhists learned to converse, not just with the wisdom of their sects’ patriarchs, but also with people outside the sects, outside Buddhism, the world at large. Many Eastern faiths passed through this phase.

The first doubt thrown upon the authenticity of Mahāyāna—whether the *sūtras* were indeed *buddhavacana* (*fo-shuo*, *bussetsu*: the words of the [historical] Buddha)—came with the first of the five-volumed *Bukkyō toitsuron* (On Unifying Buddhism) by Murakami Senshō (1851–1929) in July, 1901.<sup>5</sup> The title of the work shows the same faith as Inoue’s, a faith in uniting divided sects by uncovering a universal core. (This somewhat intellectual dream has yet to be realized.) However, what shocked the traditionalists was Murakami’s assertion that Mahāyāna was not the teaching of the historical Buddha. This *daijō hibussetsuron* controversy created a storm, inside and outside the Shinshū (Pure Land) establishment to which Murakami belonged. Murakami resigned from his priestly office and teaching post. Within his lifetime, however, the climate changed enough for him to be restored as the president of the same Shinshū academy, thus becoming the first “academic Buddhist” in what was an emerging modern university. No Far Eastern Buddhist country can match Japan in this particular aspect.

Ironically, as Mizuno Kōgen points out, a Japanese scholar more than two centuries earlier had already demonstrated, through textual analysis, the origin of Mahāyāna *sūtras* after the Buddha. Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746) had even dated the piecemeal compilation of Mahāyāna works as coming some five hundred years after Śākyamuni’s death.<sup>6</sup> He, of course, had no Western prompting, only the sharp tools of antiquarian studies he borrowed from the Confucian tradition. Found a heretic, Tominaga did not and could not attract as much sympathy as Murakami could in 1901 when the new secular, rational culture welcomed such criticism of past sacred lore. Within Buddhist circles for centuries, the Mahāyāna *sūtras* not only were thought to have been spoken by Śākyamuni during his lifetime, they were also given a specific time during the life of the Buddha down to specific days. Thus the *Mahāparinirvāna sūtra* was supposed to have been taught by the Buddha just prior to his departure.<sup>7</sup> The scheme in Tendai (T’ien-t’ai) is developed out of seminal ideas found in master Chih-i (Chigi). This was taken as fact, just as Christians for a long time took for granted that the Gospel of John was by the disciple John himself. For Mura-

kami to repudiate such authority and say that the *sūtras* could not be dated back to Śākyamuni because the scenario depicts a transhistorical Śākyamuni and a mythical angelic host with surrealist happenings was too much for the traditionalists. To them, it seemed that the Truth that is Mahāyāna was itself challenged and undermined.

Murakami, however, did not mean to say that if the *sūtras* emerged centuries after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, the teachings contained in them were then untrue. The truth of Mahāyāna was assumed by him to be valid independent of who spoke the words; the basic truths of the tradition were after all what he hoped to uncover for the purpose of unifying Buddhists of different sects in the modern world. Thus from the beginning, the liberals separated the "doctrinally true" from the "historically real"—a move that is more possible in Buddhism than in Christianity. Murakami's critics followed the sacred tradition in assuming that any true scripture (*sūtra*, what is heard) must come from the mouth of the Buddha (*bussatsu*). This is because the Dharma necessarily came from the Enlightened One; Truth (Dharma) was defined as Buddha-Dharma. Given the fact that the *sūtras*, whosoever is responsible for them, also so assumed this and rendered the *sūtras* as words spoken by Śākyamuni in some seemingly historical and geographical setting, the conservatives adhered to the datings of Chih-i. Now it can be argued that master Chih-i in China was never a *literalist* because Chih-i was equally aware of certain canonical mysteries pertaining to the preaching itself whereby, for example, the Buddha preached all Dharmas in One Voice but the recipients heard differently according to their innate capacities. Still that fact does not prove that Chih-i, on other occasions, did not take the historical *whens* and *wheres* in earnest. Medieval men could tell "myth" from "history," but they had not the modernist's acute use of "objective history" to be fully conscious of and to articulate the now-to-us unbridgeable gap between the two. Religious men had always sought out the "historical Jesus, Buddha or whatnot" but the modern *problem* of such a search is largely our own making.<sup>8</sup> Murakami, by using objective *historische* to measure past claims in a Buddhist *heilsgeschichte*, exposed a dilemma that demands a new solution. To say that the Mahāyāna teaching is true irrespective of whether it was actually taught by Buddha or not left unanswered a further question: in what ways are the Mahāyāna teachings related to whatever the Buddha might have taught in his life, if the latter can be ascertained at all?

The implications of such historical criticism are still more far-reaching as two related issues will show. If one can question the spokesmanship of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, one is also then led logically to ask about the authorship of other works in the canon. One long debate started by Murakami and supported by Mochizuki Shinkō (1869-1948) concerns the central *śāstra*, the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* attributed to the first century poet, deemed bodhisattva, Aśvaghosa. The liberal critics doubted its authenticity and would rather place it as a Chinese fabricated work in the later half of the sixth century A.D.<sup>9</sup> Here, the problem of continuity is magnified only the more by the sheer distance from Śākyamuni

muni's *parinirvāṇa* and the intrusion—who knows—of possibly Chinese ideology in this cardinal treatise crucial for Far Eastern Buddhism. The first Sanskrit Mahāyāna *sūtra* may conceivably have kept alive some memory of Śākyamuni and his teachings, but in what sense can we say that the *Awakening of Faith* remembered Aśvaghosa's legacy at all? The controversy over the authorship of this text is over a century old now, and the one-time emotional and pious investment in the pros and the cons has subsided: the question remains intriguing perhaps only for the curious. To the mellow, it is a non-question; faith in and the truth of the text seem indeed to be independent of whosoever wrote, compiled, or redacted it. But if it is a non-question, we have to ask why it can be so in a Buddhist context.

The other issue spinning off from Murakami's search for the historical Buddha concerns the Buddha Amitābha, resident Buddha of the Western Pure Land and the object of devotion of the Shinshū sect from which Murakami himself came. Faithful to the necessary logic of accepting only the historical Buddha as historical and real, Murakami considered the teaching about Amitābha in *sūtras* not datable to Śākyamuni himself to be a teaching about a symbolic being,<sup>10</sup> a personified ideal in an idealized, mythical setting of a land. In a tradition wherein the faithful had had visions of Amitābha and to whose Pure Land many ardent followers had pledged their lives, the suggestion that there is really—however "really" be understood—no Amitābha and no Pure Land except in a symbolic sense was, to say the least, very upsetting. The eighteenth vow of the bodhisattva Dharmākara (who became Amitābha) by the power of which aspirants are saved is now supposedly exposed to be due to some vivid imagination of an unknown writer. Whomever tradition accepted as the revealer of this path was unknown to Śākyamuni. This is like telling a modern day eschatologist who measures world events by the prophecies in the Book of Revelation that Saint John the Divine never witnessed the visions and that the whole Book might be some feverish dream that by sheer chance was canonized. How would the Pure Land pietists, or, for that matter, the biblical Christian, react to such disillusioning scholarship? But looking further ahead, what is it in the Buddhist tradition that seems to allow modern Japanese Buddhists to remain faithful to an "illusion"? Or how "illusions" may nonetheless be true.

Before coming to these more specific cases, let us take a look at the typical maneuvers made to resolve the dilemma posed by modern historiography. Through this we can see how the problem appears similar and yet different from the Christian one.

#### BRIDGING THE HISTORICAL ŚĀKYAMUNI AND THE LATTER-DAY TEACHINGS

To Inoue, the rational, humanistic core of Buddhist teaching is the true heritage; history was less an issue for him. When Murakami rejected the Tendai dating of the *sūtras* and recognized the late beginnings for the Mahāyāna scrip-

tures, he still had faith in locating a common core by which Buddhist schools could be united. He even entertained an old but misguided notion that seminal Mahāyāna teachings were passed down by the historical Buddha through particular disciples. The Hīnayānists kept one tradition through Ānanda while the Mahāyānists-to-come kept another through Kaśyapa. Later, Murakami would admit that his hope to unify all Buddhist schools by this scheme was premature.

However, the defense of Mahāyāna as true “in spirit” to the intention of the Buddha required more scholarly effort. The historical time gap could only be bridged by finding the linkage between Śākyamuni’s teachings and what is found in later Mahāyāna treatises. Maeda Ēun (1857–1930) provided the first attempt to fill this gap in his *Daijō Bukkyōshiron* (A History of Mahāyāna Buddhism). While accepting the later genesis of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, he tried sincerely to trace the seeds of those ideas in the teachings of Śākyamuni himself. Mahāyāna thus only gave full expression to what Śākyamuni taught or meant to teach, what sometimes the Hīnayānist had either overlooked or corrupted in their preservation of the tradition. Maeda’s idea of early Buddhist history might now be flawed by our better knowledge of those times. His reliance on Chinese texts to reconstruct early Buddhist history might not be critical enough. Still he exemplified one very viable approach to bridging the gap between the historical founder and a set of scriptures attributed to him five hundred and more years after. This became and still remains a major defense for Mahāyāna authenticity

To reinforce that claim though, the challenge of the Pali claim to the pristine truth as championed by Pali enthusiasts had to be countered. As long as the Japanese worked through the Chinese texts, they could not easily answer that on its textual grounds. Through the good fortune of the communication between Max Müller and Nanjō Bun’yū (1849–1927), the then current Western scholarship, especially as related to Sanskrit Mahāyāna texts, was introduced to Japan. This formed the basis for Japan’s early training in Sanskrit, also Pali and finally Tibetan, new avenues that allowed her to work through the canonical languages prior to their renditions into Chinese. Now those sympathetic to Sanskrit Mahāyāna texts and their message could point to some of the very early fragments embedded in these *sūtras* that compared favourably, as far as time goes, with Pali records. Pro-Mahāyānists were accustomed to pointing out the rather late compilation of the Pali canon and noting its share of later interpolated ideologies. Over this issue, scholars of the one or the other specialization still do not always see eye to eye.

Familiarity with the Pali tradition allowed Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949) to posit, more convincingly, a fundamental set of Buddhist tenets or *konpon Bukkyō* common to Hīnayāna as well as Mahāyāna. This includes items such as *anātman* (no-soul), *pratītya-samūtpada* (conditioned co-arising), etc. However, if we read Anesaki’s and other treatments of these basic tenets closely, we will notice that as Mahāyānists, they are careful not to give the impression that the

Pali tradition preserved the early, naive understanding whereas Mahāyāna elaborated upon them toward greater sophistication. That historical sequence which implicitly sets one reading up as being more pristine than the other is tabooed. Rather it is argued that Hīnayāna took one basic tenet in one way while Mahāyāna took it another way. For example, no-soul is read by the Hīnayānist more in terms of individual impermanence (*annica*) but by the Mahāyānist in terms of universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Likewise, conditioned co-arising is read by the Hīnayānist in terms of paired correlations (as in the *nidānas*), but by Mahāyānists in terms of a cosmic, totalistic interdependence of all things. By so establishing some “fundamentals” in Buddhism and elevating them *above* the temporal sequence of, and sectarian differences between, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, the disjuncture between the historical Śākyamuni and the later-day Mahāyāna readings could be smoothed over without granting primacy to the Pali records. One senses a certain intentional ahistoricity here.

However, history may also solve the problem created by historical investigations. Aside from looking for “seminal Mahāyāna ideas in the early teachings” (the genetic approach) or “sieving through both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna to locate transcendental fundamentals” (the essentialist approach), there may be, though no one puts it this way, a third way, validation by history itself. Perhaps the irony of the *Awakening of Faith* can serve to illustrate this. In arguing for the authenticity of this text, but not as one authored by the poet Aśvaghosa, Tokiwa Daijō (1870–1945) marshalled data from proven Sanskrit texts, showing how various ideas found in the *Awakening of Faith* could be traced to sound, confirmed, scriptural grounds.<sup>11</sup> However, such genetic continuity with Indian ideas does not prove Indian authorship, only the orthodoxy of “tradition.” In arguing for Chinese authorship, Mochizuki distinguished the matter of doctrinal truth from the question of actual authorship. In so far that there are elements in the *Awakening of Faith* not accountable yet by Sanskrit precedences or by accidents in transmission/translation, the judgment is tipped in favour of Mochizuki’s theory of a Chinese origin. Who won and how may now be academic. However, during their exchange, a curious coincidence was unearthed: within fifty years of its appearance in China, the *Awakening of Faith* was already charged as a forgery. As this story unfolds, however, this text was vindicated by the centrality it occupied in Mahāyāna as perceived by Fa-tsang (643–712). The academic matter of forgery was sublated and the early controversy was forgotten because of the able use of this text by Fa-tsang in explicating the telos of Mahāyāna within the Hua-yen (*Avatamsaka*) world view. In other words, the truth of its doctrine proved itself in history through the lives of faith it henceforth inspired. Not “what man made the *Awakening of Faith*,” but “what it made of men” decided the truth of its visions.<sup>12</sup> If so, the modern controversy may go the same way, has so gone to a large extent. It is not whose argument (Mochizuki or Tokiwa) wins that matters, but the degree of edification of men concerning Mahāyāna during the controversy itself. The issue of authorship is now no longer a heated issue. No wager of faith is lost by



it. Rather, the tradition is richer now for it. To say so—to allow time to decide on what might be considered canonical in Mahāyāna—may be a very liberal position to take, but I think it is the realistic stand. That liberality has always been part of the Great Vehicle tradition itself.

Not everything can be resolved by history or the historical enterprise. Not all Mahāyāna doctrines can be so easily traced to seminal ideas, shared concerns, or dogmatic eventualities. The Buddhist discovered what Christians also discovered. In the Christian West, the search for the historical Jesus ran up, eventually, against an eschatological faith that undermines our sense of time. In the Bultmannian camp, this becomes also the recognition that, continuities between Jesus' gospel and the Church's teaching notwithstanding, Jesus may not be the true beginning of Christianity; Christianity commenced in and through the Church's proclamation (*kerygma*) that the man Jesus is Christ. In the case of Barth, the whole retrogression of human temporality is annulled by the mystery of a divine interruption into time, the incarnation. One cannot hope to find God by seeking out the man; one begins with God and his voluntary self-manifestation. In a sense, the Japanese search for the historical Śākyamuni also came around to recognizing the element of discontinuity between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna that Mahāyāna *has always insisted upon!* That distinction was credal to Mahāyāna's self-understanding from its very inception, but now the modern historical awareness brings it into a deeper, clearer focus, with renewed confidence.

#### JUSTIFYING AND DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE MAHĀYĀNA GENESIS

History is not all continuous; consciousness may take a drastic paradigm shift. So even as the Japanese scholars realized that Mahāyāna ideas may be traced back to Śākyamuni or to stirrings in a liberal sectarian wing (such as the Mahāsaṅghika), the fact that Mahāyāna eventually and consciously rose above all such "lesser vehicles" is too central to be discounted, too abrupt to be smoothed over. Similar to the Western historical search, the Buddhist historian also ran up against (a) a new visioning of time and history in Mahāyāna, (b) a new proclamation concerning the real status of Śākyamuni, and (c) a dogmatic assertion of the revealed truths. The person best equipped to explicate these, being most conversant with the theoretical issues involved, was Anesaki.

Trained in England, familiar with Christian reflections, and able to handle the Pali and the Sanskrit tradition besides, Anesaki drew on Western parallels to elucidate the problems involved. He knew of the historical Jesus and of what was proclaimed about him in Christianity. He could find a similar transformation of the historical Śākyamuni into the transhistorical Buddha and note the process by which the latter was proclaimed in accordance with Mahāyānist proportions. Jesus the teacher showed the Way, but he claimed also to be the Way, even such that "whosoever has seen me has seen the Father in Heaven." Śākyamuni was the teacher of the Dharma, but he too said, "Those who have seen

me have seen the Dharma.' Jesus the Christ became, in Hellenistic reflections, the Logos incarnated in the flesh. Śākyamuni the Buddha became, in Mahāyāna reflections, coeternal with the Dharma, his appearance on earth a willed act of grace to aid mankind, and so on. In this way, Anesaki clarified the difference between tracing Mahāyāna philosophy to the Buddha's own teaching and documenting how Mahāyāna taught a new understanding of that one-time teacher. The original teaching might not include the doctrine that the Buddha is eternal, just as Jesus never said that he pre-existed at the time of the Creation, but the reinterpretation of the status of the Buddha and of Christ Jesus perceives that eternality as a matter of course. Such radical readings, such insights into discontinuities, were part of history. That is, history might proclaim its own discontinuity.

So, just as the search for the historical Jesus can only logically discover the man, the search for the historical Śākyamuni would yield only the Buddha in his physical form (*rūpakāya*). Indeed, Mahāyāna *sūtras* cannot be traced back to teachings by this *rūpakāya* (*genshinbutsu*); the *sūtras* never really claim such. The criterion and source lie elsewhere, in the transcendental Buddha (*hōsshinbutsu*), the discovery of which form is precisely what distinguishes the historical, expedient Hīnayāna Dharma from the higher, truer, revealed Truth of Mahāyāna.<sup>13</sup> Keeping in mind the theological parallel, we may say that (a) the image of an eternal Buddha challenges the whole historical quest, (b) Mahāyāna marks also a kerygmatic proclamation about the Buddha as the Dharma, (c) incarnated as such, Śākyamuni is a manifestation (*nirmanakāya*) of that eternal Truth (*Dharmakāya*). From this mature perspective, Japanese Buddhists learned to grow out of the old worry over whether the historical Śākyamuni taught the Mahāyāna *sūtras* or not. They accepted the Mahāyāna *sūtras* as embodying in mature form the essential teachings of the Buddha found expressed elsewhere, in a different (lesser, Pali) form in the *Āgamas*. The seeming time gap between Śākyamuni and the final crystallization of the Mahāyāna works need not falsify what is ultimately the Truth in and of itself. But if the Christian reader accustomed to the dilemmas left unresolved in his tradition should find certain holes in the Buddhist argument somewhere, that may not point to any sophistry on the Buddhist part. That may only unveil a basic difference in the two religions' premises about what constitutes "Truth." I will illustrate this with another modern case.

What is described above, concerning the transition from a *rūpakāya* Śākyamuni to a Buddha coeternal with the Dharma, best describes the contribution made by the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *Lotus Sūtra* had a large following in Japan as the Hokke tradition that went back to Saicho's Tendai school and as reformed by Nichiren in the Kamakura period. This *sūtra* is regarded as the crown of all *sūtras* in this tradition and Nichiren had made the recitation of its title, "Namu Myōhō Rengekyō" the one ritual chant of his faith. This homage paid to the *Sūtra of the Wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Blossom* (full title) is traditionally thought to be directed, not at the Buddha, but at the Dharma or

Saddharma. Within modern Nichirenism, there rose an internal debate whether it should be the Buddha or the Dharma that deserved the homage. Seno'o Girō (1880–1961), who eventually led a Marxist Nichiren group, was influenced by the historical scholarship of Anesaki and others, such that he proposed changing the chant to "Homage to Śākyamuni" instead.<sup>14</sup> This would seem logical if we keep to a Christianity-inspired perspective. The *Lotus Sūtra* celebrates the eternity of the Buddha. If so, should not the devotee worship, not the Dharma (that is, the *sūtra* encapsulating the Saddharma, True Law), but rather the Buddha in his cosmic significance? In Christianity, St. John's Gospel proclaimed Jesus Christ as the Logos, but Christians do not pray in the name of St. John or sing the name of Logos. So why should the Hokke faithful chant a book's title and praise the Dharma? Yet Seno'o Girō's suggestion had little impact, and Nichiren scholars who argued for the Buddha as the proper object of Nichirenite devotion also lost to the traditional defense on behalf of the Dharma. The Dharma, not the Buddha, is what is to be followed. This points to a crucial difference from the Christian position on Christ and the Logos, a difference between, ultimately, a theistic and an atheistic tradition.

From the inception of the *daijō hibussetsu* controversy, Murakami was able to dissociate "doctrinal truth" from "historical personality" because in the Buddhist tradition, the old dictum said by the Buddha "Follow the Dharma, not the Person" remained largely in force. The Dharma (Truth) is impersonal, that is, universal; the Buddha discovered the Truth; Truth is the objective nature of reality—impermanence, selflessness and the nature of suffering. In that sense, Dharma is not a function of personality. It is not by personal authority or charisma that what the Buddha taught is true; it is true because it correctly describes reality as it is. Thus, in so far that Mahāyāna can capture the same Truth, it does not really matter if the *sūtras* appeared years after the Buddha passed away. Similarly, if the *Awakening of Faith* describes truthfully in its fashion the nature of Mahāyāna as the Absolute, the fact that it appeared in China, even if it includes sinic elements, cannot nullify its noble influence on its readers. Reason, not dogma, is the mark of the original instructions of the Buddha. The Dharma—the Buddhist Logos—is not a person; Dharmakāya, *prajñā*, *śūnyatā* retain that selfsame impartial universality. The search for the historical Śākyamuni cannot endanger thereby the timeless Dharma, "good in the beginning, in the middle and at the end." This is unlike the problems created by the search for the historical Jesus. Christianity is a religion where God is a Person. There the Logos should take flesh. There the divine will had significantly "changed" in time in response to specifics in human history such that the Revelation is not timeless. Even in the *Lotus Sūtra* or Hokke tradition where Śākyamuni Buddha is the focus of its piety, the *sūtra* itself respected the dictum "Follow the Dharma, not the Person" enough to cast that personalistic gospel within the framework of its Saddharma. In the end, it is the Dharma about the eternal Buddha and not the eternal Buddha by himself that carries the existential weight. The *sūtra* as gospel—and the preaching of this Word as the

manifestation of the Word—has precedence. To it should homage be paid. (Actually, this may not be that different from the Reformation's understanding of the Word as Preaching.)

But what of devotion to Amitābha in the Pure Land school where the chant is homage to Buddha Amitābha? It is *Namu Amida butsu*, never homage to the *Pure Land Sūtra* (there might be historical reason for this). Of all the Japanese Buddhist schools, this is the one that stands most to lose in a historical enterprise, for as Murakami had to conclude, by objective standards, Amitābha is a symbolic being. One cannot even use easily the genetic argument, because the historical Śākyamuni did not know of his existence or such a plane as a Pure Land. And yet ironically, the Shinshū (Pure Land) tradition has always been the most progressive of sectarians in championing historical and critical studies. Is that due to a paradox of intention, whereby historical scholarship is best pursued by men with faith in a nonhistorical Buddha, somewhat as it is in the relationship that Pietism has German theology? Or is such ahistoricity the general trait of all Mahāyāna schools?

In the East, the search for the historical Buddha went with rational humanism; some of its practitioners are naturally suspicious of miracles and myths. Of the Buddhist sects, Pure Land had disowned magic, emphasized faith and adopted generally a more rationalistic stand to the world. In Europe, Lutheranism produced the higher critics of the Bible and more fashions in scholarly approach than, say, Calvinism (home of some of the most literalist of believers still). The venturesome quality of German scholarship may be due to its Pietistic tradition, an inner assurance (*innigkeit*) that allows it to question many more "externals" clutched more tightly by others. In Japan, the Pure Land school had also evolved toward an inward confidence since the time of Rennyō's emphasis on *anjin*. A latent Pure Land humanism existed then and has persisted since the Meiji era. It laid behind the kind of liberal rationality of an Inoue or a Murakami. It is still a mark of Japanese Buddhological scholarship. (In this, Japanese Buddhology takes a different turn from the Western. In the West, the rational interpretation of Buddhism was prevalent at one time. Edward Conze was largely instrumental in debunking that rationalistic reductionism especially by Pali enthusiasts; he unearthed the mystical and magical extravagance that was native to Buddhism from the start and remains indispensable for understanding Mahāyāna, and even more so Tantrayāna. In Japan, the critique of rationalist bias has yet to gain a wide following; Umehara Takeshi's *mikkyō* critique is an exception. But generally speaking, Japanese interpretation of Buddhism still sustains a more rationalist, pietist tone, possibly because of the Jōdō heritage.) The strength of Japanese critical scholarship is derived not from the fact that Amitābha is a nonhistorical Buddha untouched or untouchable by historical investigation, but rather from an ability to balance the sentiments of the heart, where most Japanese would place "religion" and where many Pure Land followers would find their "feeling of Absolute Dependence," and the openness of the mind to rationalistic explorations. Of course,

that openness came gradually, as the early modern controversy above has shown. But it did come.

There is one further reason why the historical search did not create as much of a problem for the faith as a similar one had for Christians in the West: namely, the strength of the Kamakura founders' personalities. In many ways, Japanese Buddhist faith is not *Jōdōteki* or *Hokkōteki* (Pure Land or Lotus-esque) as it is *Shinranteki* or *Nichirenteki*, etc. The critical textual studies might upset some sacred tenets in the *sūtras*, and historical research may revise but it can never erase the paradigmatic character of the Kamakura founders. Not Amitābha or Śākyamuni, but a Shinran or a Nichiren remain the definer of faith; not Sanskrit creeds but these model sages provide the nativistic links to the Japanese "heart." If the nonreality of Amitābha should be a problem or the fiction of a Pure Land an embarrassment these can be demythologized at the cerebral level. Soga Ryōjin wrote an essay on the bodhisattva Dharmakāra (*Hōjō bosatsu*, who became Amitābha).<sup>16</sup> In a *tour de force*, he identified Hōjō (literally, store of Dharma) with the *ālayavijñāna*, the storehouse consciousness in the Yogācāra analysis of mind, both figure as a store of all *dharma*s (realities). The result of this alignment is that the literal belief in a Pure Land may be reduced to a self-understanding by the innermost consciousness. This at first glance may seem to be so much poetic license, but it has an honourable Mahāyāna tradition behind it. The first Pure Land master by the Japanese count knew such idealism; the formula "Mind—Only Pure Land" (Pure Land as a state of mind) is even more ancient. Just as Buddhist hells might have originated as contemplative states of mind, so Buddhist Pure Lands might have originated as visions of and by a purified consciousness.

The point, however, is not whether Soga thereby resolved a dilemma by a psychological introjection of Pure Land, twentieth-century style. It is doubtful that his thesis, appreciated by pious Buddhologists, would be known or read by the masses of the faith. Even if it had been publicized in time, I doubt it changed men's feelings about the Pure Land either way. The point is that the standard assumed in the search for the historical Buddha cannot really affect the appreciation of this nonhistorical Buddha Amitābha or his idyllic Pure Land. The Mahāyāna tradition from the very beginning has cast a wide net with a comprehensiveness demanding no monolithic solution. Truth is or needs not be one or verified only by one method. The doctrine of *upāya* (expediency) has given it the flexibility required, and the end of enlightenment can justify many a means. And as long as that essence of enlightenment, the *Dharmakāya* or *prajña*, though rooted in history and in precedences, retains its timeless universality, the historical task could never endanger its effectiveness.

We seem to have come full circle. We are *back* to the old theological judgement that only the Judeo-Christian tradition is historical and Buddhism is not. Or to put that in terms of Buddhist understanding, Buddhism is universalistic and profound, and Christianity is not. All that sounds good on paper but I do not think it accords with the simple fact of human experience on both sides.

Buddhists have a sense of history, though it may not be immediately recognizable as such because its time and space scale is unfamiliar to the West. But then one might not even have to have a sense of “history” to live responsibly in history, any more than one has to have a diary to live ethically a life. (They might help to ensure a richer life but they are not prerequisites for living.) The search for the historical Śākyamuni might not have posed as great a challenge or a threat to the Buddhists as the Christian search for the historical Jesus had. But Buddhism does not end in an escape into a timeless Dharma; furthermore, one becomes only more aware that “history” is not the final standard, or that there are more “histories” than our notion of history may know. Christianity has its share of a timeless mystery that is more than a datable event; Buddhist know and care about the historicity of Śākyamuni enough to count their calendar from his *parinirvāṇa*. *Homo religiosus* might live forever in that tension between time and eternity. The way the axes cross might be different in each tradition; one always finds the faith of another man more tilted than one’s own. Instead of noting all the minor differences as we might have to do as scholars, it is perhaps more important to listen to and learn to live empathically a different life of faith in this symphony of our world’s religions.

The search for the historical Jesus or the historical Śākyamuni may in retrospect be seen as a modernist enterprise with modernist presuppositions. The easy fallacies and early over-optimism may now be clearer to us. The fact that we may never get at the truly historical personality should not prevent us from trying, or the fact that we learned to appreciate the wisdom of tradition should not mean that we suspend our critical senses. No religion, not even the most primitive, would root itself in pure ahistoricity. Even the mythic *illius tempus* said to prevail in “nonhistorical” faiths is rooted as much in time and history as far as the primitive is concerned. Perhaps in the end what we discover in any search for a historical founder is the eternal human drama that at all times that search has always been presupposed, more or less consciously but always with the same conviction in such facticity. Perhaps it is an old cliché to say that what matters in the end is the search itself and not so much the specific find—the latter is also promised the seeker, so said Jesus, so said Śākyamuni.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1. For a review of theological trends by two theologians, see Karl Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: SCM Press, 1959), and Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl E. Branton (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

2. Actually she was receptive to early Sanskrit Mahāyāna traditions even though she is associated with the Pali Buddhists’ renewed confidence.

3. For historical background, see Ienaga Saburo et al, ed., *Nihon Bukkyōshi III: kinsei, kindai hen* (Kyoto: Hōzokan, 1967); for texts, see the Iwanami series *Nihon shisō daike* volume on Kinsei Bukkyō.

4. From his preface to his *Bukkyō katsuron joron* (1885) in Yoshida Kyū’ichi, ed., *Bukkyō in Gendai Nihon shisō daike*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Tsukuma, 1965), p. 72a. My translation.

5. See excerpt, *ibid.*, p. 151–164.

6. In his "Looking at the Sūtras" series in the *Kōsei* journal, *Dharma World* 8 (February, 1981), pp. 40–42. This fact I did not know before.

7. This is reasonable, but the dating of the *Avatamsaka* and the *Lotus* is "less obvious."

8. Whether the Chinese took Chih-i *literally* or not raises the prior question: What do we mean by "literal"? And what did they mean by it: I am borrowing here from Herbert Fingarette's identical question posed in his chapter on "Karma and the Inner World," *The Self in Transformation* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965; Basic Books Inc., 1963), p. 183.

9. Collected in Michizuki Shinkō *Daijō kishinron kenkyū* (Kyoto: 1922).

10. Murakami was uneasy with the *sambhogakāya*—traditionally assigned to Amitābha—because modern historical scholarship can accept the historical *rūpakāya* and the timeless *Dharmakāya* but lacks imagination for the *sambhogakāya*; see Yoshida, *Bukkyō*, excerpt on pp. 154–155.

11. Collected in Tokiwa Daijō, *Shina Bukkyō no kenkyū* II (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1931).

12. I borrow this contrast from my professor, Wilfred C. Smith in his discussion in "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971).

13. Anesaki worked this out in his *Genshinbutsu to Hōshinbutsu* (1904).

14. See Inagaki Masami, comp. *Seno'o Giro shūkyō ronshū* (Tokyo: Daizo, 1975). The new formula was proposed as part of his *Shinkō Bukkyō* (1931), see p. 164–68. Seno'o was influenced by Anesaki.

15. The *Amitābha* corpus may be "pre-Mahayana" and unaffected by the Dharma-centeredness that was imperative to the founding of a discrete *yana*.

16. A 1963 talk, included in Yoshida, *Bukkyō*, pp. 259–86.

17. It is with some hesitation that I offer this very sweeping review of modern Japanese Buddhist responses to the problem of the historical Buddha. Except for the parallels drawn between East and West, information contained in the essay can be found in any general survey of modern Japanese Buddhist thought. The inquiry is more a personal record of one who came originally to the Buddhist materials with the modern Western bias, wondered for some time how the Japanese scholars handled this problem and eventually learned to appreciate a different "arrangement" of history and eternity in the various Mahāyāna *sūtras* and traditions. I am grateful to David Chappell for his comments and corrections on an earlier draft of this paper.