

Can the Concept of Enlightenment Evolve?

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ABSTRACT *Those who claim the concept of enlightenment (nibāna) has not evolved must rest their claim on a strong distinction between changing and variant interpretations of the concept on the one hand, and what the term really means or refers to on the other. This paper examines whether all evolution of the concept of enlightenment is best seen as interpretive variation rather than as embodying real notional change—a change in the reference of the term. It is implausible to suppose that the enlightenment has not evolved, and also implausible to suppose that the notion of enlightenment is the same across various sects of Buddhism. Zen enlightenment is not the same as Theravada enlightenment. Two points of controversy about nibāna are discussed and Christian attitudes toward scripture are compared with those in Buddhism.*

I

Those who maintain that there is no evolution of the concept of enlightenment (*nibāna*) presumably do not mean that some changes in the notion have not occurred over time. They can readily agree that to some extent, the sense of the term is historically conditioned, but they can also maintain that such historical, cultural and temporal conditioning does not amount to an evolution of the concept in any significant sense. It does not allegedly change the reference of the term. The fact that individual associations with the term and even the meaning of the term itself varies to a degree over time is no more significant for the ultimate reference and meaning of the term than the fact that all expression and understanding is historically conditioned, or that no two people mean precisely the same thing when thinking of states like ‘happiness’ and ‘sadness’ – or even of objects like buildings and chairs.

Those who claim the concept of enlightenment has not evolved in any real or philosophically significant sense must rest their claim on a strong distinction between changing and variant interpretations of the concept on the one hand, and what the term really means on the other. They believe that the real or true meaning of the term is something that various interpretations can be mistaken about. A postmodernist would of course have none of this – rejecting the very notions of truth, meaning and reference presupposed by the anti-evolutionists. Leaving postmodernist and similar kinds of objections to one side – or rather leaving the strategies they would use to defend their claims to one side, I want to ask whether all evolution of the concept of enlightenment is best seen as interpretive variation rather than as embodying real notional change. By real change or evolution I mean change that is not a mere reflection of the historicity of the concept, since all concepts are historicised to a degree, but change that reflects more substantial alteration of the notion of enlightenment – a change in the reference of the term.

An alleged sharp distinction between different interpretations of enlightenment and genuine change (evolution) of the concept is open to challenge on other than post-modernist grounds. What could the evolution of the concept of enlightenment (or any concept) amount to if not also a new, not necessarily radically new, interpretation of it? Differences in interpretation, it seems, must be central to any evolution of a concept. After all, interpretations are about, or address themselves to concepts and understandings that are already in play. Even allowing for significant differences of interpretation, if someone came up with a notion of ‘enlightenment’ that was so radically new from that which is recognised as ‘enlightenment’ under any of the recognised interpretations, they would be equivocating on the term to such an extent (absolute equivocation) that there would be no grounds for describing what they were talking about as ‘enlightenment’. Nevertheless, while rejecting the idea that differences of interpretation can *never* amount to an evolution of the concept, and at the same time also claiming that any such evolution will *necessarily* involve some interpretive differences, it is true that not every difference of interpretation amounts to, or is evidence for, an evolution in the concept itself.

Some interpretive differences as to how to understand enlightenment employ more or less the same notion and almost all are addressing the same body of scripture like the *suttas* and Upanishads. Common scripture, overlapping and shared in varying degrees, are also grounds for very different interpretations of the term. Such scripture constitutes grounds for the disagreement about the meaning of enlightenment. In either case – whether the same notion is being employed, or the argument is about the meaning of the term itself – not every disagreement about enlightenment amounts to a change or evolution of the concept. Nevertheless, differences of interpretation over time may constitute a conceptual evolution. What else could be meant by evolution except such fundamental interpretive differences over time? When does a difference in interpretation, a difference necessary to the evolution of the concept, constitute an evolution of the concept? The issues in this paper involve more general questions about interpretation and evolution, but its specific concern is with enlightenment.

II

Let us look, then, at the concept of *nibānna* to see whether substantial interpretive differences can plausibly be seen as an evolution of the concept. There are two closely related points of controversy in relation to the concept of *nibānna*. The first is foundational in relation to Buddhism and has to do with the grounds for distinguishing early Buddhism from the Upanisadic traditions on the basis of their different understanding of *Ātman*. The alleged basis of the distinction is that early Buddhism refused to regard the Upanishads as authoritative – especially in relation to the fundamental Vedic claim that *ātman* is *Brahman*. The central claims of Buddhism, including that of *nibānna*, all focus on the doctrine of no-self (*anattā*). Albahari says, Buddhism allegedly denied ‘concepts that denoted the literal existence of an eternal soul-like *Ātman*’,¹ although how to interpret this denial is, as she points out, as problematic as it is important. Minimally, this doctrine appears to deny the reality or existence of a *personal* self or ‘I’ if this is understood as anything other than the five conditioned *khandas*. Related to this and perhaps less controversially, it also denies the basic claim of Hinduism which is that *ātman*, whether understood as a personal self, or underlying

metaphysical self, is *Brahman*, or that the knowledge or realisation of that equivalence is somehow, and it remains unclear just how, necessary for *moksa* and the release from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

Albahari, following Thanissaro,² however, claims that the alleged basis for distinguishing Hinduism from Buddhism on the basis of the Buddhist rejection of the Upanisadic notion of *Ātman* – a rejection based on the central Buddhist doctrine of ‘no-self (*anattā*)’ – is mistaken once both the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) and the Upanisadic view of *ātman* (especially that of *Advaita Vedānta*) are correctly understood. Albahari says

The doctrine of ‘no-self’ (*anattā*) is deemed central to Buddhism. However, the exact meaning of *anattā* is a complex, controversial matter. The most popular readings centre around ‘no-*Ātman*’ theories of *anattā*, which have positive and negative counterparts. The ‘negative doctrine of *anattā*’, as I shall call it, takes the Buddha to have rejected all Upanisadic notions of *Ātman*; these notions depicting an ‘eternal’, ‘conscious’, ‘blissful’ element in human nature that is usually covered over by illusion (*māyā*) but fully realised in Enlightenment (*Moksa*) to be identical with Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*). The rejection of *Ātman* is seen as pivotal in what is taken, by its advocates, to be a metaphysical turning point from Hinduism to Buddhism, the latter being regarded as far less ‘extravagant’ than the former. This leads naturally to what I shall refer to as the ‘positive doctrine of *anattā*’. The positive doctrine ascribes to the Buddha the metaphysically austere position that a person, or what we commonly call the ‘self’, is nothing over and above an impermanent flux of psycho-physical, causally conditioned aggregates, known as *khandhas*: physical form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and six types of consciousness (corresponding to five senses and mind).³

Albahari argues that, as described above, both the negative and positive doctrines of *anattā* attributed to the Buddha are mistaken. They are not correct interpretations of the Buddhist position and should be rejected.

The second controversial and even more fundamental point about *nibānna* is debated among contemporary Buddhist scholars in much the same terms as it has been historically. It has to do with how *nibānna* itself is to be interpreted. The annihilationist view maintains that *nibānna* is nothing more than, nothing other than, the cessation of *dukkha*, the cessation of conditioned existence and the wheel of suffering, by means (again unclear) of the realisation of the doctrine of *anattā* or no-self which claims the self to be nothing more than the five conditioned *khandhas*. *Nibānna*, on this account, simply is annihilation.⁴ The alternative view sees *nibānna* not as merely an annihilation of conditioned existence and the *khandhas* – not a total and utter annihilation simpliciter – but as a kind of, for want of a better description, higher but impersonal and non-subjective consciousness – a state of pure unadulterated joy – albeit joy for no one – for no ‘I.’

These two points of controversy are closely intertwined. If one denies the issue of the existence of an eternal *ātman* as the fundamental point that separated early Buddhism from the Upanisadic traditions to begin with, then this leaves open the possibility of Buddhism affirming a non-annihilationist view of *nibānna*. On no account are non-annihilationist views to be equated with positing the existence of an eternal soul-like personal *Ātman*. Nevertheless, it does allegedly leave the door open for a repore

between *Advaita Vedānta* and early Buddhism. It does so by denying that either held a doctrine of eternalism (the existence of an eternal personal soul-like *Ātman*), and also by affirming that the Buddhist notion of *nibānna*, like that of *Advaita Vedānta*'s '*ātman* is *Brahman*' is not annihilationist. An even more direct connection is posited by Lindtner⁵ and repeated by Albahari⁶ in suggesting that the Buddha implied *nibānna* and *samsāra* are identical.⁷ I do not, however, understand the grounds for any such identification since *nibānna* is allegedly a release from the wheel of dependent origination and so *samsāra*. An alleged identification between moksa and *nibānna*, if anything, is more a propos.

Suppose, as Albahari⁸ and others have claimed, that it is a mistake to interpret Hinduism in general and *Advaita Vedānta* in particular as being eternalist, that is as positing an eternal personal *ātman*, and that therefore this cannot be used as point of separation of Buddhism from the Upanisadic traditions. The Buddhist non-annihilationist and non-eternalist doctrine of *nibānna*, if this is the correct interpretation, might then more accurately be seen as an evolution of the concept within the Upanisadic tradition itself instead of a radically new notion. Even if it is not the 'correct' view, the concept of *nibānna* has largely evolved as a result of the dispute between the annihilationist and eternalist views. It has been elaborated upon and interpreted, if not primarily then at least centrally, in the context of those disputes.

Following Thanissaro⁹, Albahari says that *Ātman* should be interpreted as something like 'the Unconditioned, ultimate non-conceptual reality that is our ever-present nature'.¹⁰ She claims that both the Buddha and Sankara (*Advaita Vedānta*) endorse this notion. This is what is achieved in both *nibānna* and in the end state of *Advaita Vedānta* (*moksa*) when *maya* is completely overcome. Thus, she claims that what has traditionally been seen as a principal point of difference in terms of the metaphysics between Buddhism and *Advaita Vedānta* is no difference at all. The difference is really 'methodological' – about how to achieve *nibānna* or *moksa*. Although my concern is not primarily with whether Albahari's interpretation is correct, I do want to comment on aspects of it as well as to place it in the context of the difference between *Advaita Vedānta* and early Buddhism.

What Albahari calls a 'methodological' rather than metaphysical difference between *Advaita Vedānta* and early Buddhism on how to achieve enlightenment can also, and perhaps better, be described as an elaborative evolution of the notion of enlightenment itself. Albahari rests her claim about the distinction being methodological rather than metaphysical partly on the grounds that the Buddha eschewed metaphysical speculation. It has always been difficult to determine just what is meant by such an eschewal given that the Buddha's teachings are metaphysical in nature where metaphysics is understood as examining the nature of reality, mind and matter, substance and attribute, and fact and value, but Albahari's claim seems especially peculiar. What criteria of 'metaphysical' is she employing when, following Thanissaro¹¹ she claims that viewing *nibānna* as 'the Unconditioned, ultimate non-conceptual reality that is our ever-present nature'¹² is a methodological notion rather than a metaphysical one? Perhaps she would not deny that the assertion about the Unconditioned is a metaphysical claim – one perhaps shared with *Advaita Vedānta*. She may mean only that the difference between Buddhism and *Advaita Vedānta* is in how one goes about achieving enlightenment – the method. But the recommended methodology of either Buddhism or *Advaita Vedānta* cannot be divorced from the metaphysics underlying their recommended methods. Metaphysics and method are, in either case, inextricably intertwined with one another. The idea that the Buddhist metaphysical sounding claims – including

those about how to attain enlightenment – were not metaphysical is, as in Kalupahana,¹³ often based on the notion that they are experientially grounded instead. No alleged experiential grounding, even if the experiences are veridical, entail that the claims are not also metaphysical and go beyond a pure or simple uninterrupted report of phenomenal experience.

Metaphysically speaking, the Buddha's assertions can be both empirically based as well as ontological, epistemological and logical. The Buddhist notion of experience is, of course, wider than ordinary sense experience and it includes mind as a sixth sense. Experience, for the Buddhist, extends, for example, to remembering past lives. Thus, the cycle of rebirths is an empirically verifiable truth according to Buddhism. The sharp division Buddhism draws between experience and metaphysics that is frequently used to distinguish allegedly methodological from metaphysical claims seems untenable on practical grounds – even apart from 20th century philosophical claims for the theory-laden nature of all experience.

Arguably, a more fundamental difficulty with Albahari's position is her attributing a *personalistic* eternalist interpretation of *ātman* to Hinduism and *Advaita Vedānta* in the first place, and then arguing – correctly – that the attribution of such a view is probably mistaken and must therefore be rejected as a possible ground for a 'metaphysical turning point from Hinduism to Buddhism'.¹⁴ Albahari is characterising the view of others¹⁵ a view she clearly does not share. The point is that this characterisation, even if correct, was never the grounds upon which any 'metaphysical turning point from Hinduism to Buddhism' was based. She is misled into thinking it ever was and is mistaken in representing it as such. It was based on *other* grounds relating to *ātman* and *anattā*. The equation of *ātman* with *Brahman* was always meant to entail a denial of any personal eternalist notion of self either before or after *moksa*. *Advaita Vedānta*, like other forms of Hinduism did not ordinarily see *ātman*, in its ultimate identification with *Brahman*, as a form of *personal* immortality. It is, and always has been, a kind of pantheistic impersonal immortality. She is right, therefore, in claiming that Sankara¹⁶ rejected the existence of *Ātman* as a permanent individual self, as does Deutsch in his 'philosophical reconstruction of *Advaita Vedānta*'¹⁷ – if by this one means a self equated with personal identity – an underlying object and centre of experience. This is not a novel view, but the received one.¹⁸ It is in Sankara. Furthermore, given this interpretation of *Ātman*, it must be a mistake, as Albahari argues, to claim that the allegedly fundamental distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism in relation to their respective views of *Ātman* could ever have depended on supposing that the Vedic notion of *Ātman*, either before or after liberation (*moksa*), was a permanent substantial, individual self.

Albahari says 'it is a mistake to attribute to the Buddha the view that he denied this element of our being [the "Unconditioned"], reducing our existence to merely the five conditioned *khandhas*'.¹⁹ Again, this is not a novel view. With the exception of the annihilationist interpretation of *nibānna*, this too is the received view. It is only our personal individual selves, or what we think of as such, that he reduces to the *khandhas*. The common view, and certainly the popular Western view, has never been that *nibānna* results in utter annihilation. Enlightenment is 'enlightenment', not annihilation.

Gethin says, 'In the [Upanishadic] notion of both the universal and individual *ātman* is an assumption of an unchanging and constant self that somehow underlies and is the basis for the variety of changing experiences; moreover this unchanging self is to be identified as what we ultimately are and as beyond suffering. It is this general under-

standing of the self that early Buddhist thought seeks to examine and question.²⁰ There is no mention of *ātman* as a personal self in any ordinary sense of the term here. It is seen instead as an underlying metaphysical something that, apart from an argument to the contrary, may well be identified with ‘the Unconditioned, ultimate non-conceptual reality that is our ever-present nature’.²¹ The fact that *ātman* was no doubt misinterpreted by some as an individual or personal self is really beside the point since the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism was never, contrary to Albahari’s claim, based on that difference.

This, however, does not mean that early Buddhist thought cannot have distinguished itself from the Upanishadic tradition’s understandings (they were not, after all, univocal in their understanding as Gethin shows) of *ātman* as an unchanging and constant ‘self’. An elaborate doctrine of no-self (*anattā*), a denial that *ātman* is *Brahman* and that such knowledge is salvific, and a claim that what we ordinarily take to be the self is merely the five conditioned *khandhas*, as well as other related doctrines (e.g. the wheel of dependent origination) is sufficient for making such a sharp distinction all centred around the notion of *ātman*. The distinction between the Upanishads and early Buddhist thought on *ātman* does not and never has, rested on the false dichotomy of a permanent personal self on the one hand and the unconditioned part of our natures on the other.

As we have seen, Albahari contends that historically the grounds for distinguishing between Hinduism in general and *Advaita Vedānta* in particular, on the one hand, and Buddhism, especially early Buddhism on the other, is mistaken. She claims that given a correct understanding of what is meant by *ātman* and the equation of *ātman* and the equation of *ātman* with *Brahman* in *Advaita Vedānta*, and also a proper understanding of the Buddhist notions of *nibānna* and *anattā* (no-self), the two traditions cannot plausibly be distinguished on the grounds that Hinduism believes in a self or personal immortality, while Buddhism believes in *anattā* (no-self) and an annihilationist view of *nibānna*.

Albahari’s contention is motivated by two fundamentally mistaken assumptions. The first is that the ultimate realisation that *ātman* is *Brahman* in *Advaita Vedānta* ever implied personal immortality or a notion of an everlasting substantial self after *moksa*. She does not believe it ever did, but still mistakenly suggests that this was, and by many still is, regarded as the principal reason for distinguishing Buddhism from Hinduism. *Advaita Vedānta*, as Albahari is at pains to point out with reference to Sankara and Deutsch, has not generally been interpreted as maintaining, in *moksa*, personal immortality in any robust sense of the term.

The second fundamental mistake concerns Buddhism. Kalupahana’s annihilationist view of *nibānna*, if indeed it is thoroughly annihilationist, has been held more widely than the personal immortality view of *moksa*.²² If the annihilationist view of *nibānna*, and the related doctrine of *anattā* (no-self) is interpreted as maintaining not just the annihilation of the five conditioned *khandhas*, but of utter annihilation, then this is never has been the sole orthodox view of what is meant by *nibānna*.²³ It has certainly never been the principal view of *nibānna* portrayed in the West. No doubt, some have and do hold this view, and ambiguous and equivocal support can be found for it as well as for contrary eternalist type views in scripture, but this proves little.

Gethin’s²⁴ account of *nibānna* describes one in which the history of the articulation of notion and disputes about its meaning constitutes an evolution the concept itself. *Nibānna*, Gethin claims, has come to be understood in terms of a denial of both the doctrines of annihilation as well of eternal bliss. The experience to which *nibānna*

ultimately refers *may be* what it is alleged to be – some singular unchanging experience of the ‘unconditioned’. Albahari (correspondence) says that the experience of *nibānna* is like ‘objectless awareness, but beyond the conventional subject/object dichotomy. There is no sense of a separate subject, a “me”, who is having the experience. It is just pure experience, with no objects of experience (hence “non-intentional knowledge” if that is not an oxymoron).’ Whether or not this notion is intelligible is questionable but not surprising given its alleged conceptual ineffability. It does not follow from this account that the concept of *nibānna* – of what it is and what it involves, its nature – has not evolved. It is tautological to maintain that the experience of *nibānna* is the experience of *nibānna*. This tells us nothing about the evolution of the concept or its referent.

The sharp – and perhaps overdrawn, distinction between Hinduisim and Buddhism has never been based, as Albahari contends, on the different views about by *ātman* and personal immortality. It has been based instead on the Buddha’s rejection of the Vedic tradition – especially the last portion of the Vedas, the Upanishads, in which the nature of ultimate reality is speculated upon. It is also based on the rejection of Vedic scripture as authoritative, as well as on the Buddha’s distinct teachings about ‘suffering’ and the release from suffering which in turn are all centred on the doctrine of *anattā*.

The Buddhist denial that *ātman* is *Brahman*, where this is regarded as a decisive difference between *Advaita Vedānta* and Buddhism can be interpreted in ways other than the ways Thanissaro and Albahari have interpreted it. After all, it is not just the reality of *ātman* that the Buddha is denying with his metaphysical theory of *anattā*. He attacks the equation from the other side as well. There is no Brahman, as understood in Hinduism, in Buddhism either. The Buddha does not discuss the equation of *ātman* with Brahman and was silent on asserting their existence. The idea that the notion of *ātman* with was tacitly endorsed by Buddhism is derived from the *suttas* on *nibānna* is speculative or interpretive and again amounts to an evolution of the concept of *nibānna* and, to a lesser extent, *ātman*. So there do remain substantial reasons for pointing to the issue of as it relates to Brahman as a means for distinguishing (at least on a philosophical/theological level) Hinduism from Buddhism.

Undoubtedly there are equally, if not much more, important practical social/political grounds for the divisions that we hear relatively little about. In religion, as well as politics, theory is rarely, if ever, sufficient grounds for such schisms. We know now, for example, thanks to historical biblical scholarship, archaeology and history, how many alleged doctrinal differences and disputes in the history of Judaism and early Christianity were as much, and usually more, about social and political issues rather than the alleged doctrine. Indeed, doctrinal differences can often be seen as after the fact rationalisations intended to support other more fundamental social and cultural disputes. It would be surprising if the same was not true of Buddhism in relation to its Upanishadic predecessors and rivals.

Taking these factors into account gives one a different perspective about the question of the concept of enlightenment and other central notions, evolving. Regarding the relationship between theory on the one hand, and the social and cultural on the other, to be dynamically interrelated is reason enough to suppose that the central notions of Buddhism have evolved. The discussion in this section illustrates just how the inter-related notions of *nibānna*, *ātman*, and *anattā* have evolved – and evolved in a way that not only their meaning or sense, but their reference too has altered. It is mistaken to suggest that the differences among the various sects or types of Buddhism are purely, or fundamentally, exhausted by theoretical differences. As compared with research and

theory in religious studies (e.g. history of religions), and the results of critical/historical biblical scholarship in Western religious traditions, there is, I think, a naiveté when it comes to Buddhism's own, fundamentally religious and philosophical explanations, of differences across time. Zen enlightenment is not the same as Theravada enlightenment.

III

Is the question of whether the concept of enlightenment has evolved important? One reason it may be is this: those on either side of the annihilationist/eternalist interpretation who deny that the notion has evolved are implicitly endorsing a kind of Buddhist fundamentalism – especially, but not only, in regard to interpretation of scripture. Fundamentalism in Buddhism is no more acceptable on intellectual, religious or moral grounds than it is in Christianity or Islam. They endorse a more or less literal reading of Buddhist scripture – especially in those cases where the particular passage, by itself, appears to endorse the view they favour. An extended comparison with Christian fundamentalist interpretation of scripture may help to clarify something of what is at stake not only in the refusal to recognise the evolution of the concept of enlightenment, but also in the kind of literal 'Buddha said this' interpretation of scripture evident in much Buddhist scholarship. Buddhist interpretation and reading of scripture seems to be relatively untouched by the kind of exegetical critical scholarship that that has informed biblical scholarship, philosophical theology, and in varying degrees, Western religious traditions themselves, and how they are understood, for the past 150 years.

Let's compare certain Christian attitudes toward scripture with their Buddhist counterparts. John Haldane claims to accept the value of New Testament criticism and says he has no wish to insulate Scripture from it.²⁵ Instead, he misrepresents such criticism and its findings in a way that moves towards religious fundamentalism. On the one hand Haldane claims that in terms of a debate about atheism and theism what biblical scholarship shows about the evidential value of the New Testament is not a great deal. On the other hand he clearly thinks such scholarship supports the evidential value of the New Testament. Although both Haldane and Wolterstorff²⁶ seek to overcome what John Locke called the wax-nose problem (explained below) in relation to biblical interpretation; their treatment illustrates what Locke had in mind.²⁷

Haldane's treatment of New Testament criticism, or what is now, after Robert Alter,²⁸ sometimes termed 'excavative biblical scholarship' clearly illustrates entrenched religious fundamentalism and a lack of understanding of contemporary biblical scholarship. Although Haldane claims to 'accept the value of New Testament criticism' and says he has 'no wish to insulate scripture from it',²⁹ he misrepresents its findings. He construes 'the scholarly study of scripture' in such a way that 'it supports [rather than undermines] the claims of Christianity'.³⁰ He supports his position partly by arguing against the view of S.G.F. Brandon's, referred to by J.J.C. Smart, that 'Jesus was a zealot put to death for threatening insurrection against the governing Roman authorities'.³¹ His dispute with Brandon and others on this point is basically a historical dispute and not one about the findings or implications of excavative biblical scholarship. Even if Haldane is right about Brandon's account being less plausible than the (various) synoptic accounts, there are of course many other historical, sociological and psychological accounts and interpretations of the narrative(s) that explain things differently and perhaps more plausibly than either Brandon's account or the gospel narrative. To claim, as Haldane does, that all such speculations, interpretations and historical accounts are less plausible than what he sees as the common core of the Gospel narrative is question begging.

There are various models of the actual social reality of Jesus and his movement, but little consensus.³²

Excavative biblical scholarship involves, among other things, form, source and redaction criticism. It attempts to determine various things about the 'origin of the Bible: who composed these various books, when and where, for whom, with what pre-existing texts in hand, with what traditional genres as patterns, with what historical events in mind, to make which "ideological points", and so forth, on and on'. Haldane claims that such scholarship supports the evidential value of the New Testament. He says,

[T]here is ... widespread consensus ... that Paul's Epistles were written in the 50s and 60s of the first century and that the Gospels, in more or less the form in which we have them today, were composed between 70 (Mark) and 90 (John) AD.... the thing to be struck by is how *close* these dates are to the life and death of Jesus ... the authors of the gospels were not state propagandists or spokesmen for some powerful social group ...

The trend of recent scholarship supports a more or less face-value reading of the Gospels ... [T]here are no good scholarly reasons for doubting that this [common narrative core which reflects the beliefs of the contemporary followers of Jesus] is what was pieced together within the lifetime of people who could and may have known Jesus, and that this is why they sincerely believed.³³

The dating Haldane cites is rather uncontroversial though some would put Mark at 66 AD and John closer to 100 AD. The New Testament books were in literary circulation by the mid-2nd century. Only Paul's letters and perhaps Mark were clearly written within 40 years of Christ. Haldane's conclusions are peculiar. There is a 40–60 year gap between Jesus's death and the formation of the extant gospels – which hardly makes them 'close' to the life and death of Jesus. Haldane claims that 'time and hindsight tend to improve the quality of historical writing and then as now there were plenty of people around to take issue with and correct the account of events'.³⁴ Even if Haldane is right in his overgeneralised view about the relation of time and hindsight to historical writing, the evidence from the Gospel's themselves hardly suggests that the time lapse helped those who wrote the Gospels in their quest for historical accuracy – if indeed historical accuracy was a principal concern. Historians agree that for ancient historiography it was not.

Most New Testament scholarship agrees that there is a common set of 'sayings-sources' (Q) informing the synoptic gospels. This source contains certain sayings of Jesus, key narratives, etc., and seems to stem from the oral tradition of a primitive Christian community. The synoptics deploy these sources in different ways, cite the same sayings in different narrative contexts and differ in all sorts of detail such that it is difficult to say that they – much less the very different Gospel of John – stem from a 'common narrative core'. There are very few critical historians who read any text, much less the Gospels, at 'face-value' in Haldane's sense. Redaction criticism shows that the synoptic editors worked with a relatively clear set of traditional elements that they deploy in their own ways for their own purposes. The 'common core' is the series of traditions they share.

Sophisticated students of oral and written tradition in antiquity know that tradition is not interested in reproducing events 'as they happened'. Rather, it is interested in transmitting events in a way that enables hearers to participate in their meaning in

their own setting. This undermines Haldane's equation of the forms of Christian tradition found in the Gospels with 'what the followers of Jesus saw and heard'. Ancient historians recognise that ancient historiography was thoroughly polemical. From a genre point of view, the Gospels are not historiography – except perhaps for Luke–Acts.

The New Testament is evidence for beliefs of early Christian writers, but not in Haldane's literalist sense. The question is whether these beliefs should be authoritative for later readers. This is a theological or religious decision that is under-determined by one's views as to whether or not the Gospel writers had their stories straight. Even if the common core did reflect the beliefs of the early Christians as Haldane claims, the question remains whether their interpretations of the events of Jesus's life advances or demonstrates the claim he was Messiah. This is a matter of one's religious convictions and not a historical question *per se*. Despite his disclaimer, Haldane conflates the question of religious conviction with the historical question. One can believe in the redemptive suffering of Jesus even if one believes that transmitters and editors mangled the literary traditions reporting it. The New Testament is a guide to framing the significance of Jesus's life and suffering for Christians, but its historical accuracy does not affect its religious authoritativeness in the way that Haldane (and fundamentalists) claim.

To make a long story short, it is relatively *uncontroversial* whether 'the trend of recent scholarship supports a more or less face-value reading of the Gospels'³⁵ in Haldane's sense. Redaction criticism claims that it is *incorrect* to suppose that the New Testament was more or less written down, with a few embellishments, from oral reports of eyewitnesses, or those not far removed, telling it like they believed it happened. Redaction is itself composition, but Haldane treats those who actually composed the synoptic Gospels as mere scribes. Even if one leaves reports of miraculous occurrences to one side, excavative biblical scholarship (and literary theory) is overflowing with reasons why such a seemingly straightforward and for the most part literal interpretation of the Gospels – the kind Haldane endorses – is incorrect. Part of the task of such scholarship is to determine just what it is that the various authors did mean. Whether excavative biblical scholars are correct in eschewing the kinds of claims made by Wolterstorff and Haldane about the implications of their scholarship is debatable. That such claims are eschewed is a fact they should acknowledge.

It is simply presupposed that a prerequisite of philosophy of science that philosophers of science know something about the nature of science and yet philosophers of religion are remarkably not held similarly accountable in relation to religion. There is every indication that instead of drawing upon historical, anthropological, psychological and more generally cultural accounts of religion, comparative philosophy is going the way of analytic philosophy of religion generally – operating in an academic isolation that is anything but splendid.

Haldane is not the only philosopher of religion to recently claim that their interpretations respect and take into account excavative biblical scholarship while ignoring or utterly misrepresenting it. Consider a further example. In *Divine Discourse* Nicholas Wolterstorff defends the acceptability of the belief that God speaks. He argues that interpreting texts generally, and the Bible in particular, to find out 'what the author was saying' is desirable.³⁶

Suppose one accepts authorial-discourse interpretation as the proper mode for interpreting texts generally and the Bible in particular. Can one know that one's interpretation is correct? '[A]s John Locke puts it, the outcome of biblical interpretation

threatens to be that the scripture serves but, like a nose of wax, to be turned and bent, just as may fit the contrary orthodoxies of different societies. For it is these several systems, that to each party are the just standards of truth'.³⁷ Wolterstorff's treatment of the 'wax nose' problem is indicative of the admittedly deep theological presuppositions of authorial-discourse interpretation of the Bible, and also of how problematic such interpretation is. It is odd that he does not notice that the wax nose problem, or a version of it, is just as applicable to text sense and most other modes of interpretation. Nevertheless, his suggestions for overcoming the problem in connection with authorial-discourse interpretation are unacceptable. He says, that 'there is no way to avoid employing our conviction as to what is true and loving in the process of interpreting for divine discourse – no way to circumvent ... the wax-nose anxiety.... [O]nly with awe and inspiration ... only after prayer and fasting, is it appropriate to interpret a text so as to discern what God said.... The risks cannot be evaded. But they can be diminished' given certain presumptions and tactics.³⁸ What are these presumptions?

[i] ... that the appropriator says what the person whose discourse is appropriated said ... given our convictions as to what the appropriator would have wanted and not wanted to say ... [iii] [Furthermore]one minimizes the risk by doing one's best to remain genuinely open to the possibility that the beliefs with which one approached the enterprise of interpreting for divine discourse are mistaken.... Parochialism [says Wolterstorff], especially arrogant parochialism, makes it inevitable that scripture becomes a wax nose in our hands ... [iv] one minimizes the risk of missing or misinterpreting the divine discourse by cultivating knowledge of ourselves and of the world ... [and by] coming to know God better.³⁹

The ways in which he claims the risks can be diminished do not diminish Locke's anxiety but attenuate it – and none more than the admonition to avoid 'parochialism'.

The most arresting consideration is the one about parochialism. Locke's point is surely that parochialism, in one way or another, is the issue that logically – not just psychologically – generates wax-nose anxiety. His worry is *that all interpretation of Scripture is necessarily parochial*. Wolterstorff, however, psychologises the above points and in so doing he disregards Locke's epistemological problem. Wolterstorff ways of dealing with parochialism fail to recognise that the parochial, especially the 'especially arrogant' parochial (and what serious parochialism is not arrogant?) never see themselves as such.

Consider literalism and parochialism for a moment. This issue is not going to turn out as Wolterstorff would like. Bertrand Russell's authorial-discourse reading of Jesus's teachings on Hell is vastly different and far more literal than that of Richard Swinburne's. Whose reading is more acceptable given the criteria Wolterstorff cites? Reading van Inwagen or Plantinga on the problem of evil one could easily doubt that their extrapolation of the problem is anything like Job's understanding of the problem.⁴⁰ Scripture is a wax-nose in the hands of contemporary Christian analytic philosophers of religion and Wolterstorff's treatment of Locke's wax nose problem exemplifies it.⁴¹

I have already given a brief account of why the question of the evolution of the concept of enlightenment is important and how it relates to interpretation of scripture. A useful analogy between the above critique of Christian fundamentalist readings of scripture with Buddhist readings of scripture can now be made.

IV

Those who deny that the notion of enlightenment has evolved believe that something crucial is lost if scripture is not regarded as being a more or less direct report from a more or less direct source whose identity we know. It is supposed that this view about the face value and ‘authenticity’ of scripture supports a literal reading of it.

Those who deny that the notion of enlightenment has evolved tell something of the following story. First of all, *nibānna* is regarded as term that unequivocally denotes the experience or state to which it refers – and what it refers to is non-conceptual. By ‘non-conceptual’ they can mean various things. It might, for example, mean that the term refers to an experience that cannot be conceptualised at all and that it exists independent of any concepts. Or it might mean that the experience itself cannot be grasped or ‘adequately’ understood conceptually. Thus, a term that unequivocally denotes the non-conceptual cannot evolve to denote different things over time. This is the equivalent of saying that the things Jesus did and spoke of unequivocally denote what they denote and so cannot evolve to mean or refer to different things. What Jesus meant by salvation – also an experience and state, for example, cannot come to mean different things through time. In either case, the ‘sense’ of the referent might evolve but not what is meant by the referent itself. It is of course hard to argue with a tautology and in saying that the concept of *nibānna* or salvation refers to what it refers to, the proponents of such a view seem unaware that their statement is tautological. The question is just what it is that those concepts do refer to – and it is this that changes over time. Given that our understanding of salvation and *nibānna* has changed in varying degrees over time, the terms no longer refer to what they once may have referred to – whatever that was.

Second, Buddhist who deny that the concept of enlightenment has evolved tell a story about Buddhist scripture that is remarkably similar (identical really) to the story that Haldane tells about the Bible. They deny that there is any striking parallel between *nibānna* and the Christian concept of salvation in regard to the evolution of the terms. Albahari, for example (in correspondence), claims the following. (I am paraphrasing in places.)

In Theravadin Buddhism at least, the Pali Canon is pretty much agreed to be the word of the Buddha, initially memorised by his disciples and then orally passed down generations of *sangha*, hence the repetitions as mnemonic device, before being canonised as scripture some few hundred years later. While some initial distortion may have occurred, the Pali Canon is the primary informing text for all modern *sangha* (in Theravadin tradition) and every effort is made to keep to the original teachings, down to the 227 rules observed by a Buddhist monk. The main cultural variations have occurred across Buddhist traditions (e.g. the split between Mahayana and Hinayana) but the essential teachings remain the same – albeit with different emphases. Importantly, there has been little evidence of warping to the concept of *nibānna*, which is invariably depicted as ultimate non-conceptual reality – the concept never having evolved into a mysterious metaphor posing as something literal. This is no doubt partly due to the Buddha’s own warnings against getting caught up in such conceptual tangles, at the expense of the practice to escape suffering.

Haldane etc., say the same exact thing about the New Testament – the word of Christ

laid down with little embellishment – but as argued above, New Testament (biblical ‘excavative’ scholarship has shown this view to be utterly mistaken. There is little reason to believe, partly on the basis of what we now know from biblical scholarship, that despite what is ‘pretty much agreed’ upon regarding the Pali Canon, and taking account of variations across Buddhist traditions, that the Canon is any more the word of the Buddha than that the New Testament is more or less a transcription of the words of Christ. As with the case of the Bible, the Buddhist Canon can be religiously authoritative without taken to be literally the word of Buddha.

Albahari (correspondence) says

Evolution to the concept of enlightenment would involve recognition that the notion of enlightenment in Buddhism depicts the same thing as enlightenment in Advaita Vedanta and in Taoism (and probably some other traditions). The advantage to recognising a common core is that one can exploit the different terminology and angles of different traditions to get a fuller picture of what it involves (e.g. if it includes Brahman, then the whole world is involved). Of course, one has to first argue that there is a common core!

If this were true it would amount to an evolution of the concept of enlightenment. But the process would not be any different than what has already occurred in connection to the concept among different interpreters of Buddhism.⁴² A recognition that the central notions of Buddhism alter over time in response to various theoretical as well as practical forces, may have the effect of shifting interpretive disputes from exclusively being concerned with what constitutes literal true readings of the Buddhist and Hindu canons, to the religious and practical significance of those texts as well.

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NOTES

- [1] ALBAHARI, MIRI (2002) Against no-*ātman* theories of *anattā*, *Asian Philosophy*, 12, pp. 5–20 (see p. 9).
- [2] THANISSARO, BHIKKHU (1993a) The not-self strategy, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/thanissaro/notself.html>, pp. 1–8. THANISSARO, BHIKKHU (1993b) The mind like fire unbound, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/likefire/index.html>.
- [3] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 5.
- [4] THANISSARO’s (1993a,b, op. cit., note 2; cf. ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1) idea that generations of interpreters have been misled by the Buddha’s flame metaphor into believing an annihilationist view of *nibāna* is as speculative as it is unconvincing. The metaphor was used by the Buddha to convey the extinguishing of greed, hatred and delusion and/or the Arahant dying. Supposedly, it was understood at the time of the Buddha that when a flame went out, it did not mean that it was extinguished entirely – what it means today. Rather it was taken to subsist in latent form. Thanissaro criticises scholars for not recognising this shift in meaning and hence misusing the metaphor of fire to depict *Bibbana* (and *parinibbana*) as complete annihilation. (My thanks to Miri Albahari for this explanation.)
- [5] LINDTNER, CHRISTIAN (1999) From *Brahmanism* to Buddhism, *Asian Philosophy*, 9, pp. 5–37 (see p. 20–26).
- [6] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 16.
- [7] ALBAHARI, *ibid.*, notes that Lindtner suggests this identification is ‘in line with some Mahāyāna teachings’.
- [8] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1.
- [9] THANISSARO, 1993a,b, op. cit., note 2.

- [10] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 1.
 [11] THANISSARO, 1993a,b, op. cit., note 2.
 [12] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 19.
 [13] KALUPAHANA, DAVID (1976) *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Hawaii, University of Hawaii Press).
 [14] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 19.
 [15] RAHULA, SRI WALPOLA (1958) *What the Buddha Taught* (Hong Kong, Buddhist Library of China).
 PRASAD, H.S. (2000) Dreamless sleep and soul: a controversy between Vedanta and Buddhism, *Asian Philosophy*, 10, 61–73.
 [16] SANKARA, A. (1968) in PHRABHAVANANDA, SWAMI & ISHERWOOD, CHRISTOPHER (trans.) *Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination* (CA, Vedanta Press)
 [17] Deutsch, Eliot (1969) *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press).
 [18] ALBAHARI, op. cit., note 1, p. 7, even quotes Werner (Werner, Karel (1996) Indian conceptions of human peronality, *Asian Philosophy*, 6, 94–104). ‘No Indian school of thought has ever regarded the human soul or the carrier of human personal identity as a permanent substance.
 [19] ALBAHARI, MIRI (2003) Amendments to ‘against confusing no-*ātman* theories of *anattā*, Unpublished, p. 2.
 [20] GETHIN, RUPERT (1998) *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 134.
 [21] Gethin (ibid., pp. 134–139), however, claims that early Buddhism meant to deny the reality and existence of any self whatsoever, whether eternal or not, personal or impersonal, underlying or otherwise, and that this is a principal point between early Buddhism and the Upanisads – including *Advaita Vedānta*. He says (ibid., pp. 139, 148),

Language and the fact that experiences are somehow connected fools us into thinking that there is an ‘I’ apart from and behind changing experiences – apart from the fact of experiences being connected. In reality ... for Buddhist thought there is only their ‘connectedness’ – nothing besides that. The fact that experiences are causally connected is not to be explained by reference to an unchanging self that underlies experience, but by examining the nature of causality [139].... The Buddhist critique of self is directed at all theories or view of the self that imply some sort of unchanging self whether that self is conceived of as eternal, immortal, or merely subsisting unchanged for the duration of a particular lifetime, or any period of time [148].

This appears to be an unequivocal denial of any form of eternalism and an endorsement of the annihilationist view. Yet confusingly, Gethin also endorses ‘the middle way between existence and non-existence, between annihilationism and eternalism’ (ibid., p. 78). See note 23. This ‘middle way’ appears to be a contradiction in terms.

- [22] KALUPAHANA, op. cit., note 13; COLLINS, STEVEN (1998) *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press); HARVEY, PETER (1995) *The Selfless Mind* (Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press); MAHĀTHERA, NYANATILOKA (1994) *Fundamentals of Buddhism: Four Lectures* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society).
 [23] GETHIN, op. cit., note 20, pp. 77–78, says,

The ontological status of nirvāna thus defies neat categorization and is ‘undetermined’ ... followers of Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma argue that nirvāna should be regarded as ‘real’ (dravya), while followers of the Theravāda state that it should not be said to be ‘non-existence’ (abhāva). But for the Sautrāntikas, even this is to say too much: one should not say more than that nirvāna is the absence of the defilements.... With the development of the Mahayana philosophical schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra we find attempts to articulate the ontology of nirvāna in different terms – the logic of ‘emptiness’ (śūnyatā) and non-duality (advaya).

In the face of this some early Western scholarship concluded that there was no consensus in Buddhist thought on the nature of nirvāna, or persisted in arguing either that nirvāna was mere annihilation or that it was some form of eternal bliss.... If one examines Buddhist writings one will find material that can be interpreted in isolation to support the view that nirvāna amounts to annihilation (the five aggregates of physical and mental phenomena that constitute a being are gone and the arhat is no longer reborn),

and material to support the view that it is an eternal reality. But this is not the point; the Buddhist tradition knows this. The reason why both kinds of material are there is not because the Buddhist tradition could not make up its mind. For, as we have seen, the tradition is clear on one point: nirvāna, as the post mortem condition of the Buddha and arhats, cannot be characterized as non-existence, but nor can it be characterized as existence. In fact to characterize it in either of these ways is to fall foul of one of the two basic wrong views ... between which Buddhist thought tries to steer a middle course: the annihilationist view (uccheda-vāda) and the eternalist view (śāśvata/ sassata-vāda). Thus although the schools of Buddhist thought may articulate the ontology of nirvāna in different terms, one thing is clear, and that is that they are always attempting to articulate the middle way between existence and non-existence, between annihilationism and eternalism. And it is in so far as any formulation of nirvāna's ontology is judged to have failed to maintain the delicate balance necessary to walk the middle path that it is criticized. Of course, whether any Buddhist thought's attempts at articulating the ontology of the middle way will be judged philosophically successful is another question.

- [24] GETHIN, op. cit., note 20, pp. 74–79.
- [25] See HALDANE, J.J. & SMART, J.J.C. (1996) *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford, Blackwell).
- [26] Ibid.; WOLTERSTORFF, NICHOLAS (1995) *Divine Discourse: Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- [27] LOCKE, JOHN, *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *Works* (12th edn, 1824), vol. 6, p. 295 (Cf. WOLTERSTORFF (1995:315–316, n. 4)).
- [28] ALTER, ROBERT (1992) *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York, Basic Books).
- [29] HALDANE & SMART, op. cit., note 25, p. 205.
- [30] HALDANE & SMART, op. cit., note 25.
- [31] HALDANE & SMART, op. cit., note 25. See Smart's discussion in Haldane and Smart, pp. 64–65. Also see, S.G.F. BRANDON (1962) *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967); BRANDON, The Jesus of History, *History Today*, 12, pp. 13–21; BRANDON (1966) The Trial of Jesus, *History Today*, 16, pp. 251–259.
- [32] See GAGER, JOHN (1975) *Kingdom and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall); HORSELY, RICHARD (1985) *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (New York, Seabury Press); MACK, BURTON (1995) *Who Wrote the New Testament* (San Francisco, Harper); SALDARINI, A. (1994) *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Communist* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- [33] HALDANE & SMART, op. cit., note 25, pp. 206–208.
- [34] Ibid., p. 206.
- [35] Ibid., p. 207.
- [36] WOLTERSTORFF, op. cit., note 26.
- [37] Ibid., p. 226.
- [38] Ibid., p. 236.
- [39] Ibid., pp. 237–239.
- [40] See RUSSELL, BERTRAND (1957) Why I am not a Christian, in: RUSSELL, BERTRAND (Ed.) *Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster), pp. 3–23; SWINBURNE, RICHARD, A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell, in: FREDOSSO, ALFRED J. (Ed.) *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press); VAN INWAGEN, PETER (1995) The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence, in: *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 66–95; VAN INWAGEN, PETER, The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy, in: *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 96–122. Alvin Plantinga's writings on evil have been widely reprinted and widely discussed.
- [41] See LEVINE, MICHAEL (2000) Contemporary Christian analytic philosophy of religion: biblical fundamentalism; terrible solutions to a horrible problem; and hearing God, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 48, pp. 89–119, for an extended discussion of Haldane, Wolterstorff and religious fundamentalism.
- [42] My thanks to Miri Albahari for insightful and very helpful comments and discussion.

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