

**The Importance of Historical Accuracy
in Assessing the Claims of Nichiren**

B.C. Naylor

It has been claimed that "the timeless truths of Buddhism" are more important than its historicity. In this paper I am not discussing the general validity of this claim. I am concerned only with its validity in relation to Nichiren Buddhism, particularly as expressed by members of the "True" Sect of Nichiren (Nichiren Shōshū) and its lay movement, Sōka Gakkai. In the Translator's Note to the English edition of *The Living Buddha*, by Ikeda Daisaku (third President of Sōka Gakkai from 1960) we find this statement:

Religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam lay great stress upon certain unique historical events or personages, and as a consequence are vitally concerned with the question of historicity. Buddhism however, emphasises the Dharma, or body of religious truth itself, rather than the particular time, place or person by whom it was preached. What is important, as Mr Ikeda himself notes, is not the distinction between historical truth and legend in the accounts of Sākyamuni's life but the degree to which both fact and legend embody the timeless truths of Buddhism and are meaningful to us today.¹

Anyone who has read the writings of Nichiren (1222-82) must find this statement rather odd, for, perhaps more than any other Buddhist leader, Nichiren stressed the crucial importance of "the particular time, place or person" when or by whom the Dharma had been, and was to be, preached. In this paper I wish to show firstly how he came to base his claims to be the only true messenger of the Buddha in his day on his unique understanding of what were the appropriate teachings for Japan in that age, secondly how he believed that the decline of the Dharma was an historical fact measured in exact periods, and thirdly, how significantly these measurements were mistaken.

I. The Development of Nichiren's Beliefs and Claims

As can be seen from several major works, Nichiren's belief in the supremacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* (LS) (despite some estrangement from the Tendai-Lotus Sect) remained basically unchanged from about 1253, when he began his public career, till 1282, when he died

in voluntary exile. He had been brought up to invoke Amida Buddha, whose vows were supposed to have enough merit to gain the believer rebirth in his Pure Land, where buddhahood could be attained. At the age of 12 he entered the local temple of Kiyozumi in Awa-no-kuni (now in Chiba Pref.) and began to have doubts not only about Amidism but about the eclectic approach to all the sects taken at this Tendai-Shingon temple:

While looking into the Buddha-Dharma I found there were ten clear mirrors supposed to illumine the teachings of the Buddha's lifetime. . . . Taking these ten sects as wise teachers, we are supposed to understand the essence of all the *sūtras*.²

As "every single sect boasted that it alone had grasped the core of the teachings of the Buddha's lifetime"³ Nichiren began a process of elimination to find which was true. First he decided to disregard those sects which were based on commentaries rather than on the *sūtras* directly. Then after many years' study to find the supreme *sūtra*, he accepted the interpretations of T'ient'ai-ta-shih (538-97), founder of the T'ient'ai sect in China. This sect was later established on Mt Hiei in Japan, by Saichō (Dengyō-daishi, 767-822), and known as Tendai-shū. It passed on the division of teachings (*p'an-chiao*) that had been devised by Chih-i (T'ient'ai-ta-shih), to accommodate conflicting *sūtra* teachings. All the *sūtras* of the first four periods of Śākyamuni's preaching, covering 42 years, were but provisional, while the *Lotus Sūtra* was preached during the last eight years as the final, Perfect (= "Round") teaching and the One Vehicle to buddhahood. Then the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was delivered during the last day and night to "glean" those who might have missed enlightenment by the *Lotus Sūtra*.

During his study tour at different temples, Nichiren stayed for some time on Mt Hiei, and quite possibly studied *Yōtenki*, a Tendai text compiled by Mt Hiei monks in 1223. In it is described the way Śākyamuni is supposed to have reserved the LS for the last eight years:

After that, Śākyamuni gathered those hearers with the capacity for the Round teachings, and preached the One Vehicle Dharma. This is the teaching for which Tathāgata originally came into the world — the perfectly-ordered path to buddhahood for the living beings. Thus for 40 years he prepared people's dispositions, then for eight years he taught [the One Vehicle Dharma] in the ten directions. The divisions of teachings before preaching the LS are called "earlier" teachings and all are convenient devices [to introduce] the Perfect True teachings of the One Vehicle.⁴

The process by which Nichiren struggled through the confusion

of conflicting teachings and came to accept the Tendai position has been dramatised by either him or one of his followers in the work *Shōgū Mondō Shō* (*Dialogues between some Holy Men and a Fool*). (If it was not his own composition it could have been produced by one of the Tendai monks who attended his monthly lectures and services commemorating T'ient'ai-ta-shih and Dengyō-daishi.)

After a traditional presentation of the Buddhist view of human frailty, and the dreary prospect of seemingly endless transmigrations, representatives of various sects are brought onto the stage one after the other to denigrate other sects, ridicule the poor enquirer and advocate their own ways of attaining *nirvāṇa*. Finally the enquirer sets out on a long pilgrimage to find the truth:

So, believing that my physical life should be treated as far less important than the Dharma, I climbed multitudes of mountains; drawn by grief I went round all the temples. . . . As I wandered round, sunk in thought . . . I suddenly noticed a holy man whose sonorous recital of the LS reverberated deeply in my innermost heart. . . . Then the holy man, discerning my desire to seek the Dharma, asked me in gentler tone what had brought me to this cave in the depths of the mountains.⁵

Realising that his quest was at last being taken seriously, the enquirer raised the difficulty which Nichiren must often have felt, first in his own mind, then in debate:

"All the teachings of the Tathāgata's lifetime are for the benefit of the living beings. . . . Even if some are superior to others, how can any of them lead to the evil paths?"⁶

The Hermit replied with standard Tendai arguments:

"Now the Honoured Śākyamuni, Teacher of the triple-world, left Gaya city at the age of 19, and, retiring to Mt Dandaka, practised austerities. At the age of 30, on the instant of attaining the Way, he abruptly demolished the three delusions, whereupon the dawn broke upon the great night of ignorance. Although in obedience to his original vow he should have preached the Marvellous Dharma of the LS [he could not], for the audience found the Buddha-vehicle too hard, as their capacities were many and varied. So for over 40 years he attuned the capacities of those who were to receive it, and on reaching the last eight years he expounded the Marvellous Dharma of the LS, which he had cherished in his heart when coming into the world. And so at the age of 72 he declared in the *Sūtra* of *Innumerable Meanings* (which is the preface to the LS): . . .

'In 40 years or more, the truth has not been revealed yet'.

"The meaning of this passage is that . . . for over 40 years, he says, he did not reveal the real truth. Then, indicating the year, he expounded and declared it, as when the sun appears in a blue sky or the full moon is suspended over the darkness of night. After looking at this passage, why should you cling to the provisional teachings preceding the LS, which the Buddha explained were but idle talk?⁷

II. The Argument in *Shugo Kokka Ron*

A. Criticism of *Nenbutsu*

The necessity to reject the "provisional" teachings of the first 42 years, and to practise only the LS, is argued in several major works of undisputed authorship, beginning with *Shugo Kokka Ron* (*Treatise on Defending the Country*, 1259). The main aim of this work is to show that the current wave of national disasters had been caused by the rulers' turning from the LS and relying on Jōdo (Pure Land) *sūtras*. The guardian *kami* (native gods and spirits) had thus been deprived of the only *sūtra* that could revitalise them during the Age of Decay, and hence were unable to protect Japan.⁸ Other more eminent scholars, whose sects' position had been eroded by the spread of Amidism, had denounced Jōdo teachers, especially Hōnen (1133-1213), for rejecting traditional Buddhist disciplines in favour of the "easy" practice of invoking Amida, but Nichiren said this was a side-issue. The central issue was deciding what *sūtra* Sākyamuni Buddha had chosen for the Age of Decay. It was not the relative ease that mattered, but the relative virtue of the *sūtras* and practices, and their ability to bring enlightenment to the devotees whether they understood or not.

For what reason did Nichiren claim that *nenbutsu* (invocation of Amida) was ineffective whereas "simply by chanting the name of the LS one may escape the evil paths"?⁹ It was simply that the Jodo *sūtras* were included among the provisional *sūtras* of the "40 years or more", while the LS was the final truth revealed in the last eight years, so was above any classification into "easy" or "difficult". Nonetheless it was still incalculably easier than the so-called "easy" path to buddhahood, for it was "the great direct path to enlightenment" mentioned in the *Innumerable Meanings Sūtra*, whereas the Jōdo *sūtras* brought the devotee "many sufferings in walking steep ways".¹⁰

B. The *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras*

Nichiren acknowledged that there had been famous preachers on the LS who rated it higher than Jōdo *sūtras* but nevertheless lower than the *Nirvāṇa*, *Garland* or *Great Sun sūtras*. Such were Fa-yün (467-529), Ch'eng-kuan (737?-839) of the Hua-yen (Kegon = Garland) sect, and Kōbō-daishi (774-835) of Shingon.¹¹ At the time of writing *Shugo Kokka Ron* he was still putting Shingon on a par with Tendai-Hokke, so did not challenge Shingon claims to supremacy,

but he did reject the claims to supremacy of the *Garland* and *Nirvāṇa sūtras*.

How could Nichiren claim that the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was inferior to the LS, when it was supposed to be the very last word of Sākyamuni Buddha and certainly could not be put into the "provisional" category of the first 42 years? Nichiren fell back on a quotation from ch.10 of the LS:

Thereupon the Buddha again addressed the Medicine King Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, (saying): "Infinite thousand myriad *koṭis* are the *sūtras* I preach, whether already preached, now being preached, or to be preached in the future; and among them all, this (*Lotus*) *Sūtra* is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand. . . . This *sūtra* is the mystic, essential treasury of all buddhas . . ."12

However, every *sūtra* claims to be the supreme and final word of the Buddha. So in Roll 7 of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the eminent disciple Kāśyapa is recorded to have told the Buddha that for the first time, on hearing the Buddha's exposition of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, he had arrived at right views, and that up till then they had all been people of wrong views [T374/12/2/407b]. As the LS had also preceded the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, surely Kāśyapa meant that it also contained wrong views?¹³

Nichiren reasoned that people like Kāśyapa had not understood the LS, and that they had to be retaught its truths by the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Buddha's declaration about the LS being the "most difficult" lifted it above all categories and comparisons, which applied only to the *sūtras* "already . . . now . . . to be preached".¹⁴ It was one of his favourite proof-texts.

C. The *Lotus* and the *Garland*

Nichiren rejected the *Garland* (*Avatamsaka Sūtra*) on two grounds: firstly "it lacks the [teachings of] the interpenetration of the ten spheres of existence, and the eternity of the Buddha"; secondly it is included in "the *sūtras* of the 40-odd years" in which "the truth has not yet been revealed", whereas "all the buddhas witnessed to the truth" of the LS.¹⁵ (The "interpenetration of the ten spheres", as expounded in Tendai, implies that all levels of existence, even the hells, have the buddha-nature and so are accepted as potential buddhas.) Nichiren argued that "the *Garland*, *Vaipulya*, *Prajñā* and *Two-Roll* [= *Kanmuryōju-kyō*] *sūtras*" denied ordination to breakers of the Precepts, though these people were accepted for meditation practices. They also denied buddhahood to "śrāvakas and *pratyekabuddhas*, whose nature is fixed, and to *icchāntikas* who lack buddha-seeds".¹⁶

III. Later Comparisons and Claims

From about the time of his first exile (1261-62), Nichiren began to criticize Shingon (Tōmitsu on Mt Koya and Taimitsu on Mt Hiei). As before, with other sects and *sūtras*, his criticisms rested on both doctrinal and "historical" grounds:

The *Great Sun Sūtra* and the Shingon sect do not unite the vehicles (to buddhahood) into one, and do not predict buddhahood for hinayanists, or reveal the eternity of Śākyamuni's buddhahood. Hence they [were preached] before the LS. Apart from these matters, they are the same as the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.¹⁷

It could be argued, especially from the above passage, that Nichiren did not base his faith in the LS primarily on the time it was preached, but rather on the teachings that it contained, which had to be reserved for the last eight years. However, when his opponents pointed out that the LS was not unique in containing the "highest" teachings, Nichiren gave no clear rebuttal from a doctrinal standpoint, but fell back on the "historical" argument. Thus, in *Kaimoku Shō* (1272) he quoted his opponents as saying:

"It is not only in the LS that we find that the Two Vehicles (*śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*) attain buddhahood, or that the Buddha was enlightened in the beginningless past. These things are also clear in the *Garland* and *Great Sun sūtras*. . . . So it says in the *Garland Sūtra*: 'Since Śākyamuni accomplished the way of the Buddha, innumerable *kalpas* have passed'. In the *Great Sun Sūtra* it says: 'I am the beginning and origin of all things'".¹⁸

Apparently Nichiren was unable to show that in some way the revelation of these doctrines in the LS was unique, or at least superior to that in other *sūtras*, for instead of meeting the argument he only complained that "saints and sages (had) gradually disappeared, and erring ones (had) gradually multiplied". Even clever scholars had made mistakes in failing to "distinguish provisional and true teachings. How much worse then in China and Japan, separated as they are by distance and language!"¹⁹

In other words, teachings in the "earlier" *sūtras*, no matter how lofty, could only be provisional. Further on he claimed that the *sūtras* of the first 40-odd years were not the teachings of Śākyamuni at all, but of the mentor of his pre-enlightenment years, Bodhisattva Dharmaprajñā. Then he continued:

"This is what he meant when he cancelled them all with the words 'In 40 years or more the truth has not been revealed yet'".²⁰

Likewise, when Jōdo teachers had pointed out that their *sūtras* allowed

buddhahood to those lacking it by nature, Nichiren denied that these *sūtras* could bring "real" buddhahood to such hopeless cases, when they were provisional *sūtras* of "the first 42 years".²¹ For women in particular to rely on Amida's vows during the Age of Decay was like "loading large rocks onto a small boat".²²

In an earlier passage of *Kaimoku Shō*, he had pointed out that the *Garland Sūtra*, for all its excellence, had "in no less than three places named a beginning to the enlightenment of [Śākyamuni] Buddha".²³ Hence it was "a flawed jewel", and he rejected it *in toto*. On the same grounds, however, he should have rejected the LS *in toto* also, for in it there are some passages which refer to the "initial enlightenment" of Śākyamuni²⁴ or to the impossibility of buddhahood for some hinayanists, as when Śākyamuni is supposed to have said:

"The stupid and those of little wit,
The tied to externals and the proud
Cannot believe this Dharma"²⁵

or,

"They are deeply attached to these false dharmas,
Firmly holding, unable to give them up,
Self-sufficient or self-inflated, . . .
During thousands and millions of *kalpas*,
They have not heard the name of a buddha,
Nor have they heard the True Dharma;
Men such as these can hardly be saved".²⁶

So, though he promised buddhahood to "1200 arhats"²⁷ he was glad to be rid of 5000 other arhats who were "extremely haughty" and walked out when he expounded the "perfect truth".²⁸

Instead of rejecting the whole *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren eventually came to select just "two" (1 + 2 x ½) chapters — 15b, 16 and 17a — as the words of the Original Buddha, and to treat the first 14 chapters as the teachings of the Manifestation Buddha, and provisional. Why did he not treat the *Garland* or *Great Sun sūtras* in a similar selective fashion? The only reason offered is that they were not preached "during the last eight years", and so were provisional *in toto*:

So with one fell word — "[In 40 years or more] the truth has not been revealed yet" — the Buddha wiped out the previous *sūtras*. Then as a gale scatters the black clouds to let shine the full moon in a clear sky . . . so [the Buddha] has illumined us with the words "At length after the Buddha's [preparatory] teaching, he must now proclaim the perfect truth".²⁹

IV. Innumerable Meanings Sūtra

Nichiren quoted his opponents as arguing that the quotation "the truth has not been revealed yet" applied only to statements found here and there in the earlier sūtras that denied buddhahood to hinayanists and the eternity of Śākyamuni's buddhahood.³⁰ Nichiren retorted by asking how we could be sure of any statements in these sūtras if these errors existed. "If someone declares that east is west, he will probably also declare that west is east".³¹ So all the teachings of "the first 40-odd years" were to be discarded, instead of only the isolated passages regarded as obsolete or false, though as we saw above, he did not discard the whole LS because of the same defects. He assumed, as others had before him, that the sentence "[the Buddha] must now proclaim the perfect truth" was an announcement that the LS was soon to be preached.

However, when we look at the *Innumerable Meanings Sūtra* we find no hint that it was meant only as a preface to the LS. Instead we find passages such as the following where the context demands that "this sūtra" refer to *Innumerable Meanings*:

"If a living being can hear this sūtra he will acquire great benefit. . . . If a living being cannot hear it . . . he will never accomplish supreme buddhahood".³²

Nichiren argued in *Shugo Kokka Ron* that "the great direct way to enlightenment" was the LS [p.5], but the whole of Chapter III from which he quoted is devoted to expounding the "unsurpassed worth" of the *Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings*, not the LS. He regarded this sūtra as inferior to LS because it did not teach the buddhahood of hinayanists, or the eternity of Śākyamuni's enlightenment.³³ In fact, however, it claims that "it greatly benefits all the living" since "it makes people quickly accomplish supreme buddhahood"³⁴ and there is no hint that hinayanists are excluded. The important point here though, is that Nichiren believed that this sūtra is but the preface to the LS,³⁵ and the ground for this belief is found in the "Introductory" chapter of the LS:

At that time the Buddha Sun Moon Light preached the Great-vehicle Sūtra called *Innumerable Meanings* . . . When [he] arose from his contemplation, he preached . . . the Great-vehicle Sūtra called the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma . . .³⁶

Now, according to Liu-ch'iu (438-95, author of a commentary on this sūtra, entitled *Wu-liang I Ching Hsü*), the sūtra called *Innumerable Meanings* in this passage is the same as that included in the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, and was received by him from its translator Dharmajātayaśas. Chih-i and other Buddhist scholars from that time assumed the same. However, in the sūtra itself, as we have seen, there is no hint that it is but a preface to the LS. Neither, as

we shall see, is there any certainty when the LS was composed, or what length of time might have separated the two sūtras.

V. Date of the Lotus Sūtra

It is apparent that while Nichiren sometimes used doctrinal reasons for rejecting all but the LS, his ultimate argument rested on the Tendai tradition that the LS had been reserved for "the last eight years" of Śākyamuni's lifetime (assumed by Nichiren to have ended in 949 BC). However, there is no historical evidence for this, or even for assuming that it was preached by Śākyamuni at all. Not even its written compilation can be dated with certainty, but scholars do agree that it did not originally exist as a single work. Various writings were gradually organised into different texts, probably after a period of oral transmission. As the core section gained respectability, minor sections composed independently were tacked on in various arrangements to enhance their authority. For instance the "Devadatta" chapter (Ch.12 in our present text) and the six chapters from Ch.23 ("King of Healing", or "Medicine King") to the end (Ch.28), were added later.

The most commonly-quoted dates for the writing of the LS are from 200 BC to 100 AD, when many Mahāyāna sects were coming into being and writing sūtras. Differences in the style of verse sections alternating with the prose, suggest that the verse sections in chapters 1-9 were composed earlier than those in chapters 10-21. (Rawlinson suggests 175-150 BC for the *triṣṭubh* verses in the former, and 75-25 BC for the *śloka* verses, as well as for the prose. For chapters 10-20, and chapter 27, he suggests 25-100 AD, and for chapters 21-26, about 100 AD at the earliest. His calculations are based on the presence or absence of spiritual practices such as copying the sūtras, or chanting mantras, as substitutes for concentration. Both of these were later practices.)

The dating of the various sections, and the significance of the use of "Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit" (Sanskrit imposed on popular dialects, or *Prakrit*) will continue to be debated by Sanskrit scholars, but need not detain us further here. Several centuries separate the text from the supposed speaker. Even if some of the material is based on oral traditions going back to Śākyamuni's direct disciples, there is no historical basis for ranking the sūtras in the way the Tendai School and Nichiren did. Historical and literary inaccuracy undermines the whole argument.*

VI. The Age of Decaying Dharma

Opening his treatise *Choosing the Times (Senji Shō)*, Nichiren asserted that "if one would study the Buddha-Dharma one must first become familiar with the times".³⁷ In previous sections we have seen the great importance he attached to the time when the LS was

supposed to have first been preached. But even more decisive for him was the historical period during which all other teachings had lost their power and only the title of the LS could be effective in bringing enlightenment. In many works, such as *Shimoyama Shō* (1277), he spelled out the need to understand temporal and spatial factors:

Also, when practising the Buddha-Dharma one should not only understand the differences between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, provisional and true, exoteric and esoteric, but also realise the times we are in, and consider the capacity of the hearers. . . . Further, even if someone seems very wise in the Buddha-Dharma, he will have no fruit from his religious practices, even if he inflicts pain on body and mind, unless he understands the difference made by the times, the capacity of hearers, the country and the sequence of preaching.³⁸

Further on in *Shimoyama Shō* he made it plain that by "the times" he was thinking of precisely-defined periods, not vague, overlapping epochs. There were "1000 years of Right Dharma, 1000 years of Formalistic Dharma and 10,000 years of Decaying Dharma".³⁹ In *Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō Goshō* (1266) (explaining the progressive decline in practice of the Dharma) he defined the Age of Right Dharma down to the day:

It is the 1000 years following the day after the Buddha's extinction that is called the Age of Right Dharma. Many kept the Precepts and they attained buddhahood. After the 1000 years of Formalistic Dharma come 10,000 years of Decaying Dharma. . . . The land will be filled with people lacking any precepts at all. . . . It is over 200 years since we entered the Age of Decaying Dharma.⁴⁰

These periods had been subdivided into five periods of 500 years, of which the last was the beginning of the Age of Decay. It was this last period which was so critical in Nichiren's scheme, for, according to the following passage in the *Great Collection of Sūtras (Daikkyō)*, this was the time when the "White" (= "Manifest") Dharma would "sink into oblivion" and need replacing:

In the *Great Collection of Sūtras*, the Great Enlightened World Honoured One spoke to Candraprabha Bodhisattva about the future eras, and determined them thus: after his *nirvāṇa*, during the first 500 years, people would be established in emancipation [from the cycle of birth and death]. During the next 500 years, many would be established in meditation. (This makes 1000 years.) During the next 500 years, recitation and listening to the *sūtras* would be established. During the next 500 years the building of many stupas and temples would be established. (This makes another 1000 years.) During the next 500 years

"There will be many disputes and accusations concerning my Dharma, and the White Dharma will sink into oblivion".⁴¹

Nichiren further believed that different *sūtras* had been allocated for each period of 500 years, and that special people had been assigned to preach them. The "times" thus determined not just the method of proclamation, but even whether some "timeless truths" should be proclaimed at all:

So, beginning from the first day after the Buddha's extinction, for the first 500 years only Hīnayāna *sūtras* were to be proclaimed. . . . During the latter 500 years [of Right Dharma] the proclamation of provisional Mahāyāna *sūtras* as the *Garland* and *Amida sūtras* [was committed to] . . . Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, Asvaghosa, Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. These were the great commentators. They did not fail to understand the deepest truths of the LS, but because the time for proclaiming the LS had not come, and the Honoured Śākyamuni had not committed it to them, they kept this Great Dharma in their hearts without talking about it.⁴²

Similarly, other teachers had been allocated for the Age of Formalistic Dharma, when "the Buddha-Dharma of Yüeh-chih found its way into China and Japan". During this time, "Śākyamuni entrusted the first half of the LS, the 14 chapters of the teachings of the Manifest Dharma, to Bhaiṣajya-rāja Bodhisattva and other great *bodhisattvas* of the other directions converted by these teachings".⁴³

In *Senji Shō* also he argued that the "deepest mysteries" of the LS had been unfolded very gradually, but admitted that to reserve them for the fools of the Age of Decay and not entrust them to Chih-i or Saichō was indeed strange:

The Great Dharma not proclaimed by Kāśyapa and Ananda is what was proclaimed by Asvaghosa, Nāgārjuna, Aryadeva and Vasubandhu. . . . Then the Great Dharma left [untaught] by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu was proclaimed by T'ient'ai-ta-shih. Then the Great Precepts of the Perfect Sudden [Enlightenment] not proclaimed by T'ient'ai Chih-che were instituted by Dengyō-daishi. This is quite evident. Yet, incredibly, although the Buddha explained it exhaustively, [none of the above masters] has yet proclaimed the greatest deep mystery of the Right Dharma, plain on the surface of the text. That this deep Dharma is to be propagated in all Jambudvīpa during the fifth period of 500 years at the beginning of the Age of Decay is strange beyond imagining.⁴⁴

To find this "greatest deep mystery" we must look at *Kanjin Honzon Shō*, whose full title is *Nyorai Metsugo Go Gohyakusai Kanjin*

Honzon Shō (For the First Time Since the Extinction of Tathāgata, During the Fifth Period of 500 Years, the Fundamental Object of Worship is Contemplated in our Minds). In this work Nichiren makes his own "division of the teachings", according to which the teachings of the Manifestation Buddha Śākyamuni were revealed in the first fourteen chapters, and committed to Chih-i and Saichō for the people of the Age of Formalistic Dharma. The teachings of the Original Buddha were in the next fourteen chapters, but more particularly in Chapter 16, and the adjacent halves of chapters 15 and 17. Compared to the teachings of this small section, everything else was just provisional. But for the Age of Decay the teachings of the Original Buddha (the "greatest deep mystery") had been condensed even further into just five words — the title of the LS "*myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō*":

When we come to discuss the teachings of the Original Buddha, we find they have always been entirely meant for people at the beginning of the Age of Decay as their principal audience. . . . These teachings are the same during both Śākyamuni's lifetime and the beginning of the Age of Decay: the pure Round teachings. . . . The former teachings take one chapter plus two half-chapters; the latter is only the five words of the Sacred Title.⁴⁵

Because the "medicine" of these five words was so potent, it was sufficient for the fools of the Age of Decay. Therefore, despite the darkness of this age, it was the best time to be born. Chih-i and Saichō had "lamented being in the middle period [of Formalistic Dharma] and longed for the beginning of the Age of Decay".⁴⁶ Chih-i had been the true LS devotee during the first 500 years of this "middle period", and Saichō during the latter 500 years, but neither of them could be the devotees for the Age of Decay.⁴⁷ The T'ient'ai patriarchs had been "the assembly to proclaim the teachings of the Manifest Buddha", but this could be only "the prelude for the five words '(Na-mu-)myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō', the essence of the Eternal Life chapter of the Original Buddha, to be recited to all the living beings of Jambudvīpa by the great *bodhisattvas* from the earth at the beginning of the Age of Decay".⁴⁸

Thus in having been born at the beginning of the Age of Decay, Nichiren considered himself more fortunate than, and superior to, the renowned T'ient'ai patriarchs of China and Saichō in Japan. But when compared to the faithless Tendai monks who had deserted the LS for Shingon he was even greater, for "even a leper chanting the Sacred Title of the LS was superior to the Chief Tendai Abbot".⁴⁹

The True Devotee and Teacher

It is clear that Nichiren saw the times as defining not only the right teaching and practice, but also the true devotee and teacher as well. Saichō could be the true devotee for his own age, but he

himself had written that it was "the first period of 500 years of Decaying Dharma" that was "truly the time for those with a capacity for the One Vehicle of the LS".⁵⁰

As for other teachers of his own age, they all "erred in the relative depth and merits of the *sūtras*", so were like farmers who "sow seed in untilled land and look for a harvest in winter".⁵¹ It was not that they disagreed about the nature of their times; they only disagreed about the teachings suited for those times. Amidists taught that "during the Age of Decay only those trying to practise the Manifest Dharma of the Pure Land teachings can escape the cycle of birth and death".⁵² To prove that it was the LS, not the *Meditation on Eternal Life Sūtra* that the Buddha had designated specifically for the Age of Decay, Nichiren quoted from Chapter 23 of the LS, in which the following command is attributed to him: "In the last 500 years, after my extinction, proclaim and spread [it] abroad in Jambudvīpa, lest it be lost".⁵³

Nichiren here ignored the fact that in this passage "spread it abroad" refers not to the LS as a whole or to its title, but to "this chapter of the former deeds of the King of Healing", and that this chapter was tacked onto the LS centuries after the main body had been compiled. But even more disastrous to his argument is the fact that he was not in the "last 500-year period" at all, as we shall now see.

When Did the Age of Decay Begin?

Nichiren's conviction that Japan was then "in the last period of 500 years, over 2210 years since the extinction of the Tathagata, and the hour for proclaiming the *Lotus Sūtra*" was stated also in *Kyōkijōkoku Shō* (1262?), and this "understanding of the times" and other factors of propagation was made the basis of his claim to be National Teacher.⁵⁴ After his exile on Sado also, he often stressed the importance of its being "over 200 years since the Age of Decay began",⁵⁵ or "over 2200 years since the extinction of the Buddha".⁵⁶

Calculating from these figures, Śākyamuni would have died over 2930 years ago from now, a figure that is not accepted even by Nichiren's modern-day followers, although they do not usually draw attention to the discrepancy. Thus Ikeda Daisaku follows modern scholarship in writing that Śākyamuni died "some twenty-five hundred years ago".⁵⁷ This estimate is based on Ceylonese and Greek chronicles (Indian sources being deficient in dates) to calculate the dates of the Indian Monarch Aśoka, and of his predecessors King Bindusara and King Candragupta. King Aśoka (reigned 269-32 BC) is recorded as having been consecrated 218 years after the death of Śākyamuni, whose dates are accordingly given as 563-483 BC. However, others have calculated the date of his death as 486 BC, 477 BC, or even 386 BC.

Even taking the earliest of these dates (486 BC), only 1760 years had passed since Śākyamuni's death, not "over 2220 years", when Nichiren wrote *Toki-dono Gohenji*, for instance. According to the time-scheme which he followed, he was therefore in the middle of "the fourth period of 500 years", not the crucial fifth. It was still the Age of Formalistic Dharma, and the arguments about Saichō's not being able to be the true devotee for that 5th period applied to himself. Further, there was no special reason for preferring the practice of chanting the title of the LS to the exclusion of everything else — by his own arguments.

I do not wish to imply that if Nichiren's dating had been correct then his claims would have been justified, for his logic was sometimes weak, his quotations torn out of context, and his sources were sometimes dubious, even in Buddhist terms. Neither am I blaming him for his historical errors, for he was simply following the generally-accepted date for the death of Śākyamuni — 949 BC. Chinese Buddhists had pushed back the date to make sure that Śākyamuni predated Lao-tzu and Confucius, who were made out to be either re-incarnations or disciples of the Buddha, instead of the other way round. The oldest of these dates is 2422 BC. The 949 BC date ("5th year of Emperor Mu" [1001-946 BC]) is found in *Kwang-hung-ming-chi*.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, however understandable his error may be, we must recognise how completely it undermines his claims, and we must not allow his errors to be covered up by smooth talk about "the timeless truths of Buddhism".

* For a fuller discussion see Ch'en, K: Buddhism, pp.13-15; Mochizuki, *Būkkyo Daijiten* (Supplement) Vol.6, pp.4-6; Thomas, E.: *Life of Buddha*, ch.3. Pye (in *The Buddha*, pp.12-13) challenges the basis of this reckoning but accepts the general conclusion, as Śākyamuni was a contemporary of Magadha kings Bimbisara (546-494) and Ajātasatru (494-461). (See also Kanakura Enshō (ed.): *Hokekyō no Seiritsu to Tenkai*, Heiraku-ji Shoten 1970; *Preface to Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, trans. by Leon Hurvitz, pp.xvii-xxxviii; Rawlinson, A., *Spiritual Practice in the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, from *Wege Zur Ganzheit, Festschrift Zum Geburtstag von Lama Anaganka Gorina*, a PhD thesis, published by Kaser-Defi Ashram, Almored Indien 1973.)

Notes

1. Burton Watson, p.ix.
2. *Hō-on Shō*, Tokoro 250-51; *Zenshū* 1416; *Gosho* 293-94.
3. idem.
4. *Yōtenki*, in *Shintō Shisō Shū*, p.44.
5. *Zenshū* 567; *Gosho* 478-79.
6. op.cit., *Zenshū* 568; *Gosho* 479.
7. *Shōgū Mondō Shō*, *Zenshū* 569; *Gosho* 480, quoting *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* (TLS), T276/9/2/386-b.
8. Tok.49-50; *Zenshū* 258-59; *Gosho* 61.
9. Tok. 62; *Zenshū* 271; *Gosho* 70.
10. TLS 19, quoted in Tok. 38-39; *Zenshū* 247; *Gosho* 54.
11. *Kyō-ki-ji-koku Shō*, *Zenshū* 450; *Gosho* 440.
12. TLS 190, T262/9/1/31-d.
13. *Shugo Kokka Ron*, Tok. 21; *Gosho* 41.
14. idem.
15. *Shugo Kokka Ron*, Tok. 25-26.
16. Tok. 39.
17. *Kenbōhō Shō*, Tok. 96; *Zenshū* 477.
18. *Bunshū* 226, *Zenshū* 783-84; *Gosho* 199, quoting Roll 80 of *Kegon-kyō*, ch.39/21, in T274/19/3/443a, and Roll 3 of *Dainichi-kyō*, ch.8, in T848/18/1/22b.
19. *Kaimoku Shō*, *Bun*.226-27; *Zenshū* 784; *Gosho* 199-200.
20. *Bun*. 241; *Zenshū* 796; *Gosho* 208.
21. *Shugo*, Tok. 45.
22. *Nyonin Ōjō Shō*, *Zenshū*, 52.
23. *Bun*. 221; *Zenshū* 770.
24. Ch.9 "Destiny of Arhats", TLS 182.
25. Ch.2, TLS 74.
26. TLS 66.
27. p.74.
28. p.55, 58-59.
29. *Innumerable Meanings Sūtra*, quoted in *Kaimoku Shō*, *Bun*. 238-39; *Gosho* 206; *Zenshū* 794.
30. *Kenbōhō Shō* (1262), Tok. 84; *Zenshū* 463.
31. *ibid.*, Tok. 85; *Zenshū* 464.
32. TLS 18-19, T276/9/2/387b.
33. Tok. 20.
34. TLS 19.
35. Tok. 18.
36. TLS 43-44, T262/9/1/4a.
37. Tok. 194.
38. Tok.311; *Zenshū* 1511-12; *Gosho* 344.
39. Tok. 313.
40. Tok. 104; *Zenshū* 539-40; *Gosho* 1495.
41. *Senji Shō*, Tok. 196, *Zenshū* 1192, *Gosho* 258, quoting *Daijikkō* Roll 55, T397/13/3/363a-b.

42. *Shimoyama Shō*, Tok. 313; *Zenshū* 1514, *Gosho* 346.
 43. idem.
 44. Tok. 217; *Zenshū* 1213-14; *Gosho* 272.
 45. Tok. 149-50; *Bun.* 314-15; *Zenshū* 958; Renondeau 247-48.
 46. *Senji Shō* Tok. 199; *Gosho* 260.
 47. *Kaimoku Shō*, *Bun.* 231.
 48. *Shimoyama Shō*, Tok. 313; *Zenshū* 1515; *Gosho* 346.
 49. *Senji Shō*, Tok. 200; *Gosho* 260.
 50. *Shugo Kokkai Shō* Vol.A/b, T2364/74/4/177b, quoted in *Kaimoku Shō*, *Bun.* 272, *Zenshū* 823; *Gosho* 226.
 51. *Shimoyama Shō*, Tok. 313.
 52. *Senji Shō*, Tok. 197; *Zenshū* 1192.
 53. TLS 310, quoted in *Shugo Kokka Ron*, Tok.31; *Zenshū* 240; *Gosho* 48.
 54. *Zenshū* 451-52; *Gosho* 440-41.
 55. *Senji Shō* Tok. 205.
 56. *Toki-dono Gohenji* (1273), *Zenshū* 1987.
 57. *The Living Buddha*, p.vii.
 58. T2103/52/100-d.

Glossary

- 天照大神 Amaterasu Ōmikami. Sun Goddess.
 阿彌陀仏 Amida (Amitabha). Chief Buddha of Jōdo (Pure Land) sect.
 阿房国 Awa-no-kuni (= Anshū, or Bōshu). A province of the Tōkaidō, now Chiba Pref.
 薬師如来 Bhaiṣajya-guru (Yakushi Nyorai). Buddha of Healing.
 薬師王 Bhaiṣajya-rāja (Yakushi Ō). Bodhisattva King of Healing. (The two are not always distinguished. [cf., Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha*].)
 菩薩 bodhisattva (bosatsu). A being on the way to buddahood.
 末法 Decaying Dharma, Age of (*mappō*). Age when people are no longer able to understand or practise the teachings of B; follows Age of Right Dharma (*shōhō*) and Age of Formalistic Dharma (*zōhō*).

- 法 Dharma (Hō). Teaching, truth, law, teachings of Buddha.
 比叡山 Hiei-zan. Mt Hiei, Headquarters of Japanese Tendai.
 小乘 Hīnayāna (shōjō). "Lesser Vehicle" teachings for the few; a derogatory term used by those believing in Mahāyāna, the "Greater Vehicle".
 一闍提 icchantika (issendai). A sentient being that, lacking buddha-seeds, is inherently insensitive to the Buddha's teaching and will attain buddhahood only after inconceivably long and painful practice, if at all.
 閻浮提 Jambudvīpa (Enbudai). Name of the great island south of Mt Sumeru. In traditional cosmology the name denotes the world in which we live.
 淨土宗 Jōdo Shū. Pure Land Sect which regards Amida Buddha's 18th vow as the most important for rebirth in Amida's Pure Land (Western Paradise). [In this paper, is synonymous with Amidism.]
 却 kalpa (kō). An aeon, variously described, e.g. a period during which a man's lifespan decreases one year every 100 years from 840,000 to 10 years, and increases in the same way to 840,000 years.
 神 kami. (Japanese) deity, spirit.
 俱胝 koṭi (kutei). A very large number — 10m, 100m, etc.
 大乘 Mahāyāna (daijō). "Greater Vehicle" teachings of Buddhism, probably taught from first century BC onwards. Teaches the potential buddahood of all.

- 南無妙法蓮華經 *Namu-myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō*. "Adoration to the Marvellous Dharma of the Lotus Sūtra". A *mantra* believed by Nichirenites to embody the law of the universe.
- 念仏 *nenbutsu*. Invocation of Amida Buddha. (Literally "mindfulness of the Buddha".)
- 涅槃 *nirvāna* (*nehan*). Release from the cycle of existence by extinguishing all illusions and destroying all *karma*.
- 判教 *p'an-chiao* (*hankyō*). Classification of sūtras according to doctrine and method, to determine the final teachings of the Buddha.
- 独覺/緣覺 *pratyekabuddha* (*dokaku/engaku*). A "cause-knower" — one who obtains enlightenment by his own recognition of the 12 links of causation. Contrasted with *śrāvakas*.
- śloka/*anuṣṭubh*. A loose metre used in Sanskrit epic poetry, with four lines (*pada*) of eight syllables each.
- 創価学会 *Sōka Gakkai*. "Value-creation Educational Society". Lay movement of Nichiren Shō Shū, founded 1930 by Makiguchi Tsunesaburō on the dual basis of his theory of value, and religious practice of Nichiren Shō Shū. Ultimate values are beauty, gain and goodness.
- 声聞 *śrāvaka* (*shōmon*). One who gains enlightenment by sharing Buddha's teachings.
- 經 *sūtra* (*kyō*). Line, string, scripture. Verses or sentences conveying Buddha's teachings.
- 台密 *Taimitsu*. Esoteric teachings of Tendai on Mt Hiei.
- 如来 *Tathāgata* (*Nyorai*). An epithet of Buddha — "one who has come/gone thus". In Mahāyāna, "one who has gone to *tathatā*".
- 真如 *tathatā* (*shinnyo*). Underlying nature of things, absolute reality, suchness.

- 天台宗 *T'ient'ai Tsung* (*Tendai Shū*). One of the 13 Chinese and also one of the 13 Japanese Buddhist sects. Founded by Chih-i (T'ient'ai-ta-shih = Tendai-daishi) on the basis of Lotus Sūtra teachings. Śākyamuni's teachings are divided into five periods and eight teachings (*goji-hakkyō*). Three truths (*santai*) of non-substantiality (*kū*), provisional reality (*ke*) and ultimate truth (*chū*) are seen as three facets of one truth.
- 五時八教
三諦
(空化中)
- 東密 *Tōmitsu*. Esoteric teachings of Mt Kōya, first practised by Kūkai at Tō-ji.
- triṣṭubh*. The most common Vedic metre, with four lines of 11 syllables each.
- 月氏 *Yüeh-chih*. Probably an Indo-European-speaking people which moved from NW China down to NW India (corresponding to modern Afghanistan), where they founded the Kushan Empire. Nichiren often used the term to mean India.

Biographical Notes

- 無著 *Asaṅga* (*Mujaku*, 310-390). Born of a Brahman in N. India; changed from Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna under the teaching of Maitreya, then converted his older brother Vasubandhu. Expounded *Yogācāra*.
- 阿育王 *Aśoka* (*Aiku-ō*, reigned 269-232 BC). Third king of Mauryan dynasty (N. India); grandson of Candragupta. Conquered Kalinga 261 BC; murdered many kin and their friends before seizing the throne during Alexander's invasions. Remorseful at atrocities, converted to Buddhism. Third Buddhist Council held probably just before his death 231 BC.
- 澄觀 *Ch'eng-kuan* (*Chōkan*, 737?-938). Fourth patriarch of Hua-yen (*Kegon*) sect; helped translate the 40-roll version of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.

- 伝教大師 (最澄) Dengyō-daishi (= Saichō, 767-822). Founder of the Japanese Tendai sect.
- 法雲 Fa-yūn (Hō-un, 467-529). Chief Abbot of Kuan-che temple, and famous for lectures on *Lotus Sūtra* and *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*.
- 法然 (源空) Hōnen (Genkū, 1133-1212). Founder of Japanese Jōdo Sect. After his warrior father was killed and his family scattered, he entered Bodai-ji where his uncle was Abbot, then went to Mt Hiei. Expelled from Enryaku-ji for rejecting Tendai practices; built Chion-ji in Kyōto; founded Jōdo Sect. Converts included Tendai monks, warriors, and commoners, as well as retired emperor Goshirakawa, and nobles. Wrote *Senjaku Shū*.
- 迦葉 Kāśyapa (Kashō). In Nichiren, usually denotes Mahā-kāśyapa, a leading disciple of Śākyamuni.
- 弘法大師 (空海) Kōbō-daishi (= Kūkai, 774-835). Founder of Japanese Shingon. Initiated in esoteric Buddhism 804, in Chang-an. Propagated esoteric Buddhism on Mt Takao, and initiated many people, including Saichō. Established Kongō-bu-in on Mt Kōya, 816, and given Tō-ji in Kyōto, 823. Works include *Jūjūshin Ron* and *Kenmitsu Nikyō Ron*.
- 鳩摩羅什 Kumārajīva (Kumaraju, 344-413). Central Asian prince who went to China in 401. Famed as translator of Buddhist texts, especially the *Lotus Sūtra*.
- 劉虬 Liu-ch'iu (438-495). Author of *Introduction to Innumerable Meanings Sūtra (Wu-liang I Ching Hsü)*.
- 龍樹 Nāgārjuna (Ryūju). Born 2nd or 3rd century AD in S. India. Founder of Mādhyamika School, and one of the chief philosophers of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Nichiren (1222-1282). Born the year after ex-Emperor Gotoba defeated by Hōjō Yoshitoki and exiled to Oki, and other reigning or retired emperors also exiled. Ordained 1237, but studied at various temples till 1252, when he decided that the *Lotus Sūtra* was uniquely supreme. After proclaiming this and denouncing Amidism at his own temple at Kiyozumi, was expelled by the Steward Kagenobu and went to Kamakura where he gained followers. After further study of the *sūtras* to discover why Japan was being so continuously devastated by natural disasters, he concluded it was because the rulers had deserted the *Lotus Sūtra* for Amidism, and wrote *Shugo Kokka Ron* for disciples, and *Risshō Ankoku Ron* for the Regent Hōjō Tokiyori. This was ignored, but further preaching resulted in arrest and exile to Izu 1261. Pardoned 1263, he worked in Kamakura and surrounding districts, visiting his former Abbot Dōzen-bō whom he again warned against Amidism. Attacked again by Kagenobu 1264 at Komatsubara. 1268, warned that Mongols would invade Japan as punishment by the gods for not heeding him, the true *Lotus Sūtra* devotee. 1271, challenged Ritsu monk Ryōkan who had been commissioned by the Regent to pray for rain. Arrested and exiled to Sado Is., 9th month; many disciples imprisoned or suffered confiscation of lands. Pardoned 2nd month, 1274. Returned to Kamakura and warned Hōjō Yoritsuna that the Mongols would attack that year unless they heeded his preaching. Left Kamakura, arrived Mt Minobu 5th month, where he wrote and taught disciples till chronic diarrhoea caused death in 1282. When Mongol fleet destroyed by storm for second time 1281, saving most of Japan from invasion (contrary to his predictions) he enjoined silence on his disciples.

釈迦牟尼 Śākyamuni (Shakamuni/Oshaka-sama, 565?-485? BC. For dates see text). The name of the historical Buddha — "the Sage of the Śākya clan". Family name was Gautama and his given name Siddhartha (Gotama, Siddhatta in Pali). Son of King Suddhodana in Kapilavastu, Central India.

天台大師 (智顛) T'ient'ai-ta-shih (Tendai-daishi, 538-597). Posthumous title of Chih-i (Chikai), third patriarch of Chinese T'ient'ai, but generally regarded as founder of the sect, on Mt T'ient'ai. Wrote three commentaries on *Lotus Sūtra* — *Fa-hua Hsüan-i (Hokke Gengi)*, *Fa-hua Wen-chū (Hokke Monku)*, and *Mo-ho Chih-kuan (Maka Shikan)*.

世親

Vasubandhu (Seshin, 5th century AD). As a Hīnayāna scholar, wrote *Abhidharma-kośa Sāstra*. Converted to Mahāyāna by brother Asaṅga, and founded the Consciousness-only School.

Works of Nichiren Quoted in this Paper

		Page No. in Zenshū
Hō-on Shō 報恩抄	(1276)	II/1415
Kaimoku Shō 開目抄	(1272)	I/764
Kanjin Honzon Shō 観心本尊抄	(1273)	I/941
Kyōkijikoku Shō 教機時国抄	(1262?)	I/447
Nyonin Jōbutsu Shō 女人成佛抄	(1256 or 1265)	I/548
Risshō Ankoku Ron 立正安国論	(1260)	I/389
Senji Shō 選時抄	(1275?)	I/1189
Shimoyama Shō 下山抄	(1277)	II/1510
Shōgū Mondō Shō 聖愚問答抄	(1265)	I/560
Shugo Kokka Ron 守護国家論	(1259)	I/222
Toki-dono Gohenji 富木殿御返事	(1273)	I/987

Sūtras, Commentaries and Classics

觀無量壽經	<i>Amitayur-dhyāna Sūtra</i> (<i>Kanmuryōju-kyō</i>). Sūtra of Meditation on Buddha Amitayus. One of the three Jōdo sūtras.
華嚴經	<i>Avatamsaka Sūtra</i> (<i>Kegon-kyō</i>). Garland Sūtra.
大般涅槃經	<i>Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra</i> (<i>Ta-pan-nieh-p'an Ching</i> - <i>Daihatsu Nehan-gyō</i> , T374, 375). Great Nirvāṇa Sūtra.
大日經	<i>Mahāvairocana Sūtra</i> (<i>Dainichi-kyō</i>). Great Sun Sūtra (<i>Mahāvairocāni-bhisambodhi</i> Sūtra T848).
妙法蓮華經	<i>Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra</i> (<i>Miao-fa Lien-hua</i> <i>Ching</i> = <i>Myōhōrenge-kyō</i> , Kumārajīva's translation 400 AD, T262). Lotus Sūtra.
守護国界章	<i>Shugo Kokkai Shō</i> , by Saichō, 817 AD.
大方等大集經	<i>Ta-fang-teng Ta-chi Ching</i> (<i>Daihōdō Daijikkō</i> , in 60 rolls, T397). Great Collection of Sūtras.
無量義經	<i>Wu-liang I Ching</i> (<i>Muryōgi-kyō</i> T276). Innumerable Meanings Sūtra.
燿天記	<i>Yōtenki</i> . Buddhist-Shintō teachings thought to have been compiled by Mt Hiei monks in 1223.

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Are Historians of Religions Necessarily Believers?

Robert A. Segal

As defined by leading practitioners like Mircea Eliade, the history of religions, like the phenomenology of religion, purports only to describe, not to endorse, the believer's view of the origin, function, and meaning of religion. I argue that historians, whether or not phenomenologists, in fact commit themselves to endorsing the believer's view.

Take, as representative, the position of Eliade. According to him, religion originates and functions to link human beings to the "sacred" — an impersonal realm beyond individual gods. Human beings seek to encounter the sacred both temporally and spatially. They long to experience both the places where the sacred has manifested itself — for example, a particular stone or tree — and the pre-fallen, Edenic epoch when the gods, who are agents of the sacred, were near:

... since religious man cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred, we must expect to find a large number of techniques for consecrating space. . . . Religious man's desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire . . . to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.¹

It is easy to understand why the memory of that marvelous time haunted religious man, why he periodically sought to return to it. *In illo tempore* the gods had displayed their greatest powers. The cosmogony is the supreme divine manifestation, the paradigmatic act of strength, superabundance, and creativity. Religious man . . . seeks to reside at the very source of primordial reality, when the world was *in statu nascendi*.²

Human beings, says Eliade, yearn to experience the sacred not as the means to an end but as the end itself. They seek the sacred because they seek the sacred, not because they seek something else through it. Security and peace of mind are among the many happy consequences of contact with the sacred, but contact itself remains the end. Human beings, for Eliade, not merely want but need contact with the sacred: ". . . religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existence. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for being".³ In saying continually that man is *homo religiosus*, Eliade is saying that contact with the sacred is man's essential need.