Religious concepts of ‘salvation’ or ‘liberation,’ in one way or another, imply a relationship to history and therefore to time. We aspire to be saved ‘out of’ time by somehow participating in eternity, the antithesis of time, or ‘within’ time either now in some kind of human fulfilment or in a future that must be worked towards and awaited. This temporality or putative atemporality of salvation is inseparable from our religious tradition’s relationship with history. As we shall see, this is significantly different in Buddhist and Christian contexts. Christianity’s Jewish ancestry means that salvation itself is a historical event, and facts such as the census of Augustus or the governorship of Pontius Pilate are enshrined in Luke’s gospel and the creed. In some sense, the fact that Jesus lived and died at a certain time in a certain place is a crucial verification of the whole Christian phenomenon, despite the attempts of some existentialist theologians to diminish its significance. But it is still not possible, nor is it felt necessary, to reconstruct a biography of Jesus that would establish the ‘facts’ of his life in a definitive way, and ‘events’ such as the resurrection and ascension are meta-historical in any case. Gautama, living five hundred years earlier (a specific if inexact historical fact!), is even less historically accessible, and his Indian context makes it much more plausible that what we glean about his earthly existence from the voluminous Buddhist writings is more in the realm of myth and legend than history in any modern sense. Yet at the same time the Pāli canon is replete with vivid detail about life in northeast India, the personalities who dominated it, and the localities around which it centred.

Underlying these relatively superficial observations, however, is the deeper question of the anchoring of human existence itself in some kind of temporal-historical continuum and the relevance of this situation—or predicament, according to one’s point of view—to the attainment of whatever ultimate goal we strive for. The urgency of the Christian struggle in a once-only here and now seems to contrast sharply with Buddhism’s Indian worldview of perpetual rebirth determined by the fruits of our actions in a cyclic process without beginning or end. How do these differing perspectives influence the way Buddhists and Christians actually live? There are thus two intertwined questions to be kept in mind in what follows: the question of whether what we know about the origins and development of Buddhist and Christian traditions is in
any sense historical fact; and the question of whether those embarking on ei-
ther way of salvation need to come to terms with the history of their tradition.

History, in the strict sense of an objective account of what was thought, said and done in former times, is an invention of Western modernity. It was certainly anticipated in antiquity, for example in the works of Herodotus and Thucydides, in the great chronicles of Sri Lanka, the Mahāvamsa and the Dipavamsa, and in the ‘historical’ books of the Hebrew Bible. But the ideal of reconstructing the past as it really was (wie es eigentlich gewesen, Leopold von Ranke) emerged only as the European Enlightenment began to insist on scientific standards, not just in the investigation of nature but also in the investigation of the past using critical methods to establish the meaning of texts and archaeological remains. Initially developed for the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, these methods were quickly applied to the complex structures of the Bible and eventually to the flood of documents which began flowing in from colonial India and other parts of the Orient.

Both Buddhists and Christians will detect resonances in what follows with concerns arising in each of their traditions as they come to terms with history or, more precisely with the growing awareness of the ‘historicity’ of their traditions. The movement known as ‘modernism’ in the early twentieth-century Catholic Church, for example, was an attempt to take the historicity of scripture and tradition seriously, and it was condemned by Pius X in precisely these terms, as can be seen in the anti-modernist oath, which had to be taken by all clergy, religious superiors, and professors of theology and philosophy. As Perry Schmidt-Leukel points out, the key sentence in the oath repudiated the view that Catholic scholars should proceed “solely by scientific principles, excluding all sacred authority, and with the same liberty of judgement that is common in the investigation of all ordinary historical documents” (Schmidt-Leukel 2014). Something similar applies to Buddhists: even highly educated Japanese Buddhists are sometimes deeply shocked to learn that their revered Mahāyāna Sūtras could not possibly have been delivered by the ‘historical Buddha’ Śākyamuni. Underlying the concept of history, moreover, is the understanding of time, and this has varied greatly, not only across cultural and religious traditions, but within both Western and Eastern philosophy. In this paper I wish to show that developments in phenomenology and hermeneutics have produced ideas of time which not only influence the philosophy of history but have resonances with understandings of time in Buddhism, so that in both cases the status of history and its relevance to religious belief and practice,

1 See Kreiner 2014 also in the same collection of papers from the 2013 conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies.