

Nirvana as the Last Thing?
The Iconic End of the Narrative Imagination¹

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In this essay I argue that the life of the world to come, the hoped-for final end of the individual Christian (and perhaps of all people), cannot be characterized or represented narratively because attempts so to represent it are always both incoherent and idolatrous; that the life of the world to come can be represented both formally and iconically; and that what Buddhists have said about Nirvana may serve Christians in the development of more adequate formal and iconic representations of the life of the world to come. This is, then, an essay in Christian theology understood principally as an abstract elucidation of some syntactical elements in the Christian master text, and secondarily as commentary upon some semantic elements therein.

The essay is undertaken with an eye to some resources in Buddhist thought (though these resources won't be treated explicitly until close to its end). Since Christian theology is an omnivorous beast (which is another way of saying that it is catholic), little apology is needed, I think, for making use of such resources. Anything of use to the Church's enterprise of coming to understand more fully the message with the preservation and transmission of which it is charged ought to be used; and there is no good theological reason for thinking that useful materials are to be found only among those things that Christians have thought and said. But it is important to note that 'Buddhism' in this essay is used very much as 'Christianity' is: as synecdoche for 'Buddhist master text', which in turn is (my understanding of) a collection of semantic items and syntactical rules for combination of those items at a much higher level of abstraction than anything found in any actual Buddhist literary works or practices. I shall only occasionally descend to the level of such particulars. This is not because I have any objection to considering them. Indeed, it seems to me that the deep nourishment of Christian theology by religiously alien traditions such as Buddhism will only be achieved by serious attention to just such specifics, an attention that requires a kind of deep, serious, and concentrated reading whose archetypal literary product is the commentary. But this essay is not an appropriate vehicle for that enterprise; it must remain at a much more abstract level.

Eschatology: Some Distinctions

Eschatology's topic is the *eschata*, the last things, and its content is the thoughts and words produced by considering this topic. It has two domains: the individual and the universal. Individual eschatology interests itself in the last things of particular objects or states of affairs. It is interested in, for instance, the end of this man, that horse, the book on the shelf over there, the Tudor dynasty, the Clinton presidency. Universal eschatology, by contrast, is interested in the last things of the universe considered as a whole.

Both individual and universal eschatology are concerned with endings of temporal sequences. If there are last things there must have been preceding things (even if not first things), even if the temporal gap separating them is vanishingly small: the feeble apocalypse of a clock's tock can be what it is (an ending, a last thing) only because there was the humble genesis of its tick (a beginning, a first thing).² But endings, whether of individuals or of the universe, are not all of one conceptual kind, and eschatology must be further analyzed according to different senses of 'ending'. Three such senses will be important for this essay.

First, there are endings understood as terminations. A termination is the simple ending of an unnarratable temporal sequence, which is to say the bringing to a halt of a sequence without *telos*, without aim or goal, and therefore also without possibility of closure. It is precisely because of the absence of *telos* that such sequences cannot be represented by a narrative, though they may be represented in other ways. Consider the *Annals of St. Gall*, in which the entry for the year A.D. 709 reads "Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died," and that for 710 reads "Hard year and deficient in crops."³ An annal lists a sequence of events like these without turning them into a narrative, which is to say (partially, but most importantly) without turning the events into a plot-without, as the narratologists would say, emplotting them. A plot (without which there is no narrative) requires a goal, an end, the possibility of completion: it demands that the sequence of events it treats be presented as (and be capable of being seen as) directed and meaningful. A sequence treated by an annalist is, by contrast, presented as a list, as one damn thing after another, without expectation or possibility of resolution or closure. The presentation of such a sequence must either terminate or extend infinitely; its ideal type, perhaps, would be a description of someone announcing, one after another, each numeral in the series of natural numbers. Temporal sequences incapable of emplotment need not only be represented annalistically; they can also be represented formally or iconically (and perhaps in other ways too). I'll say more about these possibilities below.

Second, there are endings understood as truncations. A truncation is the unexpected and inappropriate ending of a narratable temporal sequence, an ending by which the goal or aim of the sequence is cut off, its proper development curtailed. A sequence of this sort does possess a *telos*, and may be represented narratively, with emplotment and the other devices that jointly constitute a narrative. But its goal is not realized; the sequence (and any narrative

representing it) ends prematurely. A literary presentation of a narratable (and narrated) sequence is not often truncated, for obvious reasons; this usually occurs when, as with Dickens's *Edwin Drood*, authors are unable to bring a narrative to an end for reasons beyond their control. A decision as to whether truncation is common in life, rather than literature, must rest upon more fundamental metaphysical convictions; but there are certainly many endings which most of us would think of as truncations. The chrysalis is crushed underfoot before it can become a butterfly; the organism dies by violence before transmitting its DNA; the performance of *Die Zauberflöte* is brought to a halt by the sudden heart attack of the man singing Papageno in the first act (perhaps as he launches into the "Schnelle Füße, rascher Mut," with Pamina). All these events seem to prevent the sequence of which they form a part from reaching its implied goal or end, and in so doing to truncate it.

Third, there are endings understood as completions. A completion is the full and final ending of a narratable temporal sequence, an ending by which the goal or aim of the sequence is realized, and (when presented literarily) made evident. Temporal sequences ended by completion are in every respect like those ended by truncation, except that they are not prematurely cut off. Their literary presentation will be more like *Great Expectations* than *Edwin Drood*; and in life they may be typified by the chrysalis becoming a butterfly.

Eschatology, whether individual or universal, may be concerned with endings (last things) in any or all of these senses. A particular thing might be thought of and represented as ending by termination, truncation, or completion; so might the universe. But a final distinction (in the shape of a warning) is useful at this point. It is the distinction between transitional and final eschatology. The former treats the events immediately preceding, leading up to, and culminating in the final event, the end (whether termination, truncation, or completion); but it does not treat what follows that final event, for that is the topic of final eschatology. Suppose the temporal sequence treated is the aforementioned truncated performance of *Die Zauberflöte*. Its last thing, we might say, is the ringing down of the curtain upon a scene of chaos shortly after the collapse of Papageno. Transitional eschatology would treat the signs of this end: the wavering and physical uncertainty of Papageno in the moments before the collapse, the reactions of the rest of the cast and the audience to these symptoms, and so on. But transitional eschatology would stop with the curtain's descent, for that would decisively mark the end of the performance. Final eschatology would pick up at this point, and would ask what can be said about the performance after its end. The answer to the final-eschatological question in the case of sequences that end by truncation or termination will usually (though not always, as will become clear) be 'nothing'. That particular performance is simply over; it has no future of which to speak, just as there is nothing to be said about the recitation of an infinite series of numbers after its termination (other than that it has been terminated).

Transitional eschatology, then, treats the events leading up to and

culminating in the end of a sequence; final eschatology treats what is to be said about that sequence upon its ending. Transitional eschatology is only eschatology by courtesy, as it were; it bears much the same relation to final eschatology (which is eschatology proper) as obstetrics does to pediatrics. The warning connected with the distinction between transitional and final eschatology is, then, not to treat the former as though it were the latter: it is the latter (final eschatology) that raises the interesting theoretical and theological questions, and it is exclusively the latter with which this essay will be concerned.

These distinctions yield the following picture. Final eschatology is of two kinds according to whether it treats the ends of particular things and states of affairs (individual eschatology), or the end of everything (universal eschatology). Each of these has three further kinds, depending upon how the ends in question are construed, yielding: individual final eschatology concerned with terminations, truncations, or completions; and universal final eschatology concerned with the same three ends.

Individual final eschatology understood in this way is of interest to most human beings. Almost everyone considers what to think and say about their own end, and in doing so engages in one or more of the kinds of eschatology mentioned. And, of course, eschatology in theoretic or dramatic dress is found almost everywhere: there are Marxist, Buddhist, Islamic, and even democratic eschatologies, as well as literary ones without clear and obvious affiliation to any religion or political ideology. As a result, while the term 'eschatology' is a technical one that belongs to Christian theology, that to which it refers is by no means so limited. This essay, while it is an exercise in Christian theology, will be concerned to do what it does in that sphere in explicit awareness of and interaction with at least one other species of eschatology: that belonging to Indian Buddhist thought and centering around the idea of Nirvana. But before proceeding to the constructive parts of this essay it is important to say a little more (in regrettably abstract and didactic fashion) about the semantics and syntax of specifically Christian eschatology.

Christian Eschatology

Christian theologians (and many Christians who are not theologians) have been interested in most (though not all) of the kinds of eschatology already mentioned. A large proportion of what is usually called eschatology by theologians and historians of Christianity, though, is what I have called transitional eschatology: it is literary or conceptual material that treats the events leading up to the end, events that mark the transition from what can be narrated to what cannot. The story (whether of an individual or of the universe) approaches its completion (or truncation) by way of events that can be narrated because they are (still) capable of emplotment. Most apocalyptic literature, including most of the Book of Revelation and the other biblical apocalypses, represents transitional rather than final eschatology, and this is a large part of its attraction. There is still a story to tell, and often a dramatic and highly-colored one. When we read of the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven, trailing glory (Dan 7:14), or of the Lamb opening the seven-sealed book (Rev 6), or of the sun darkening and the stars falling from heaven (Mark 13:24-25), or of the Day of the Lord (Isa 26-29), we are reading transitional eschatology, not final eschatology. Many traditional Christian concepts, for example that of purgatory, also move in the sphere of transitional rather than final eschatology, for here too there is still a story to tell, the story of purification from sin before entry upon final beatitude.⁴ I shall not be further concerned with this material in what follows.

Christian theology also treats final eschatology in both its universal and individual kinds. In neither case does it envisage the possibility of endings understood as terminations. This is because it is intrinsic to Christian thought to understand the sequence of events that constitutes the history of the universe, as well as the sequence that constitutes the history of each individual within it, as narratable, which is to say as bearing the weight of a goal or purpose. Any such sequence must end either by truncation (when its purpose is not realized), or by completion (when it is). Termination is an ending possible only for unnarratable sequences, and as a result the last things of the universe and of every individual within it cannot, from the viewpoint of Christian theology, be seen as a termination; they can be seen only as a truncation or a completion.

Christians are committed to seeing both the events of their own lives and those of the universe as narratable because that is how the Bible presents them and that is how the Church has consistently interpreted and represented what the Bible says. The universe has a narratable beginning: *bereshith*, "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1);⁵ it has a narrative crux, which is the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; and it will have an end in which the fabric of the heavens will be rolled up like a scroll (Rev 6:14), and with which the Lord Jesus's coming again will be inextricably associated (Rev 22:20). The ending is implied already in the beginning: the *explicit* was implicit in the *incipit*, and each moment between is a *kairos*, a God-given opportune moment. The life of each individual, too, is narratable, and in a similar way: it begins in the womb, finds

its crux in Jesus of Nazareth (Rom 6:4-11), and looks forward in hope to a final resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15). The narratability of the universe's history and of the history of each individual within it is a central syntactical principle of Christian thought. This principle implies a final eschatology with respect to both kinds of history, and one that can be construed only in terms of truncation or completion.

A further general point can be made about the syntax of Christian eschatology. It is that there is an important dissimilarity between what Christians must say in final-eschatological voice about the universe, and what we must say about individuals within it. The universe's final end must be understood as a completion rather than a truncation, while each individual may end either by truncation or by completion. Why the difference? The universe's completion is guaranteed by the axiom that God's purposes for the whole cannot be frustrated; this means that the *telos* (whatever exactly it is) of the universe must be realized, which is also to say that its final end must be a completion, rather than a truncation (or a termination). To deny that this is so would be to deny that the labor pains of the created order (Rom 8:22) will issue in birth; it would also be to deny the universal transformative efficacy of the cross and the resurrection, and so to deny the necessity and effect of the incarnation, as well as the essentially triune nature of God. The universe's final end, then, cannot but be a completion, and it is a central function of Christian final eschatology to indicate this fact. For Christians, one of the functions of the theological virtue of faith is precisely to provide knowledge that the necessary and inevitable final end of the universe will be a completion (though not to provide knowledge of the exact nature of this completion).⁶

But it is different with the last things of individuals. According to Christian theology, these may be either truncations or completions, which is to say that each individual may be either damned or saved. When the narratable sequence of the events of the life of an individual does not issue in a realization of the *telos* of that individual's life, there is truncation. And when the sequence does issue in such a realization, there is completion. Truncation is possible, of course, because each individual may refuse the gift of salvation offered by God. No matter how often and how violently the three-person'd God batters the heart with that gift, it can be refused. And when the gift is systematically and consistently refused, the *telos* of the refuser's life cannot be realized precisely because that *telos* is to be understood formally as repeated acceptance of God's gift. Christians must allow the possibility of individual final ends that are truncations on pain of denying human freedom, just as we must allow the possibility of individual final ends that are completions on pain of denying God's power and love.

Another asymmetry should now be evident: it is syntactically impossible for Christian final eschatology to affirm the possibility that all individual final ends might be truncations (that damnation might be universal); but the affirmation that all individual final ends might be completions (that salvation

might be universal) is syntactically required. Notice, too, that the positions described in this and the preceding paragraph say nothing about the possibility of knowing whether any particular individual will meet a final end that is a truncation or one that is a completion. Such knowledge is certainly impossible for us with respect to anyone now living; it is largely impossible, too, with respect to anyone who has died.⁷ The relevant theological virtue here is hope: by it, we Christians hope for our own salvation (for the completion of our narrative rather than its truncation), for the salvation of those we love, and for the salvation of all. But none of these things can be known in our epistemically limited condition here below.

The upshot of these remarks is that Christian theology concerns itself with both individual and universal final eschatology; that it places the latter under the rubric of completion and the former under the rubrics of both truncation and completion; and that it thereby rules out the possibility of simple termination for both individuals and the universe.

This sketch of the syntax of Christian eschatology permits a precise framing of the central question of this essay: How may Christians represent the last things of individuals, their final ends? What discursive possibilities are there for the representation of truncation or completion so far as individuals are concerned?

Completion and After

It follows from the definitions so far given that the sequence of events by which an individual's life is made up can no longer be narrated after completion has been reached. Completion entails the impossibility of further narrative representation because such representation requires emplotment, which in turn requires a teleological order, a sequence of events aimed at closure. But with completion, closure has been attained and the *telos* has been reached. No further emplotment is possible: there is no narrator, no narratee, no subject, no dramatic tension, no resolution, no progress. This begins to sound like simple cessation: the end of the individual whose life has reached its completion. But any such view is ruled out by the syntax of Christian faith and hope, as already indicated: completion, for Christians, entails not an ending or an emptiness, but a radical remaking that is a fulfilment as well as a kind of beginning, the *resurrectio mortuorum et vita venturi saeculi*.⁸ But how then, if not narratively, is this life of the world to come to be represented?

Christians have certainly thought it important to represent it. There are visual representations of hell and heaven; there are prayers to and for the dead; there are eulogies at funerals in which the blissful condition of the dead is at least mentioned and sometimes depicted in detail. Heaven (and hell) seem to cry out for depiction, and sometimes even for narrative representation.⁹ But the argument to this point has been that, while Ludwig Wittgenstein was incorrect to say that death is not an event in life because it is not lived through,¹⁰ it must nonetheless be correct to say that in so far as the event that is the completion of a

human life (leaving aside the question of whether this completion is identical with physical death) is lived through, this is done with no further *telos*, and so without the possibility of being narrated. Does it then follow that the rich panoply of Christian representations of the life of the world to come (consider Dante) is just a mistake? Ought our representations of this matter be so chastened that we place shackles upon the pious practices or imaginings of Christians that have to do with their own deaths and those of their beloveds? Must, as is too often the case, the theologian with a taste for abstraction and an awareness of the tendencies of the imagination to manufacture idols, chastise the devout for the crudities of their piety?

Carol Zaleski has recently argued, in a theologically subtle and stylistically elegant book, that such a radical constraint upon the eschatological imagination would be disastrous for the practice of Christianity, and for human flourishing in general.¹² She pleads for the preservation and development of imaginatively rich conceptions of the life of the world to come on the ground that Christians need and must deploy symbols of immortality if we are to have a sense of a wider context than that bounded by the horizons of physical birth and physical death, and that such a sense is essential for the development of the virtue of hope and of a fruitful and properly Christian orientation to the goods of this sublunary world. An objection to symbols of immortality, she says, would also be an objection to the use of any and all symbols for the divine in the Christian life, and would thus be a return to the heresy of the iconoclasts. Much of Zaleski's argument is correct, and importantly so.¹³ But her analysis needs to be pressed further if it is to yield helpful answers to the question of this essay; if she's right that we Christians need symbolic representations of what follows the completion of a human life (and she is), it still needs to be asked how best to characterize the nature of those representations, how best to discriminate acceptable from unacceptable symbolic representations, and whether there are any appropriate nonsymbolic characterizations of the matter. That is, if Zaleski's contention about the necessity of the eschatological imagination is to be accepted, it still needs to be asked how that imagination can function properly if narrative representation is proscribed.¹⁴

Two key points are needed to develop Zaleski's analysis. The first is that not all representation of what follows the completion of an individual's life need be symbolic: those events may also be characterized formally. The second is that even those representations that are properly thought of as symbolic in Zaleski's sense (she uses a blend of Paul Tillich's and Paul Ricoeur's analyses of the symbol) must eschew narrative symbolization; and that, therefore, a better category for exploring the possibilities of non-narrative and non-formal representations of the life of the world to come is the icon rather than the symbol.¹⁵

First, on formal characterizations of the life of the world to come. Christians have developed such characterizations principally by negation. We have said that what follows upon the completion of a human life will be in

virtually every respect profoundly different, inconceivably different, from what precedes it. We affirm that this life is (or will eventually become)¹⁶ embodied, and that it is social in that it is constituted by relations at least with God and perhaps with other created beings. We affirm also that, because it is a completion, all the goods of this present life are brought to a proper consummation in it. But these affirmations are (or ought to be) framed and constrained by apophatic formalities, which is to say by a deep epistemic modesty. We do not know what our resurrected bodies will be like; sociality in eternity is strictly inconceivable for us, in large part because the possibility of emplotment is constitutive of our present understanding of sociality, and so the idea of a non-narratable form of sociality makes little immediate sense; and we have little idea which among what now seem to us the goods of this life are in fact goods, and so also little idea of what it would mean for those that are genuine goods to be consummated.¹⁷

Such apophatic formalities are entirely biblical. When questions about the particulars of the life of the world to come are pressed, the typical response is refusal, as when Jesus responds to the question about spousal relations in the resurrection by denying the applicability of the category (Luke 20:34-38), or when Paul refuses the question about the nature of the resurrected body by emphasizing its difference from the pre-resurrection body and the unknowability of the details of that difference (1 Cor 15:36-58). In both these passages, the incomprehensibility of the particulars of the life of the world to come is emphasized principally by replacing all attempts to narrate those particulars (attempts implicit in the questions offered to Jesus and Paul) with a strictly formal characterization. Jesus contrasts the always narratable marriage customs of the children of this world with the utter absence of such narratable customs among those whose lives have been completed in the final eschaton; and this is to be read as a formal negation that denies a particular narratable property (and by implication all such properties) to the resurrected. Similarly, Paul offers a series of formal negations as a means of contrasting resurrected bodies with our bodies. The former are of a different sort than the latter, but this difference is explained formally by listing the properties of the latter and then negating them (earthly/heavenly, corruptible/incorruptible, dishonorable/glorious, weak/strong, natural/spiritual, and so forth). But he is willing to offer neither a narrated nor a substantively positive account of what the resurrected body will be like; this, he says, is a mystery best characterized as consisting in radical and incomprehensible change (1 Cor 15:51).¹⁸

Final eschatology in the mode of apophatic formality is, therefore, one way in which the unnarratable life of the world to come can (and must, if idolatry is to be restrained) be represented. But even formal negations can represent that with which their negations have to do in another mode, a mode best understood as iconic. Consider Paul's fine words, *blepomen gar arti di'esoptrou en ainigmati, tote de prosopon pros prosopon; arti ginoko ek merous, tote de epignosomai kathos kai epegnosthen* (1 Cor 13:12)-"For now we see enigmatically, through a

mirror, but then we shall see face to face; now I know partially, but then I will fully know as I have been fully known." These words are explicit in their assertion of the necessity of deep epistemic modesty with respect to matters of final eschatology, as also in their formal assertion that the life of the world to come (*arti-tote*, now-then) will be the completion (fulfilment, consummation) of life now (*ginosko-epignosomai*, I know-I will fully know), a condition in which epistemic modesty will no longer be necessary. They imply, too, in their use of the figure of the mirror to characterize our present state, a reflection of our gaze back to ourselves by something finite, something not God, something that is an idol. We look and we do not see God; we see only a half-understood, shadowy image that, if taken to be God, becomes an idol. This preliminary and premature reflection of our gaze back to ourselves is characteristic of the inevitably idolatrous tendencies of our perceptions and judgments now, but not then; then, we shall see God directly; our gaze will not be reflected back to us by anything other than God.¹⁹

Substantively, Paul's sentence says almost nothing about the nature or particulars of the life of the world to come. But it can be more than an assertion of the necessity of apophatic formalities; it can be an icon, a sign of that about which it speaks in which attentive readers (or hearers) can find their understanding of the life of the world to come addressed by and conformed to precisely the God in relation with whom that life will be lived. In the interpretation briefly sketched in the preceding paragraph, I have already begun to treat it as such, as a form of words that permits the eye or the ear to take it not as an idol, a fixed, exhausted object, limited by its lineaments, but rather as an icon whose mode of being is not exhausted or fixed or frozen by being heard (or read), but which points to (suggests, evokes, provokes) something strictly inexhaustible, which is God and our eternal praise of him in the life of the world to come. Through this verbal icon, God gazes at us and leads our gaze toward (though does not bring it to) the completion of our lives in the life of the world to come.²⁰

The point of these all-too-brief remarks about apophatic formalities and icons has been to suggest two things. First, that what Zaleski advocates as rich imaginative conceptions of the life of the world to come are better (and more precisely) understood as iconic representations, representations (in word, music, or image) by means of which God addresses us and directs our understanding and our vision toward the eternal future of our worshipful return to him of what he has given (and gives and will give) to us-toward (without ever reaching), that is to say, our final eschaton. Second, that the proper concepts for thinking about final individual eschatology should themselves be iconic, which means at least that they should serve recursively to remove their own tendencies to become fixed, immovable items (idols) in the conceptual furniture of our understanding. Christians, therefore, ought to represent human life after completion only by icons, some strictly conceptual and some imagistic.²¹

There is neither space nor occasion here for a full characterization of the

iconic. I can note only that although an icon must have material or rhetorical properties of a certain sort, the presence of these will not guarantee its status as iconic. The property *being an icon* is therefore not without remainder an aesthetic property, nor one whose presence or absence can be decisively ascertained by the work of the critic. Ordered complexity in a certain degree, whose presence can be so ascertained, must no doubt be possessed by anything with claim to be called beautiful, and may suffice to make what possesses it beautiful. But icons, although they must be beautiful (and therefore must be complexly ordered) are not made iconic just by being beautiful. Rather, *being an icon* is a property constituted also indexically and relationally. Your icon may be my idol; my idol may be your icon; what was once my idol might become my icon. This is obvious, I take it, from the fact that it is possible to treat the words of the Bible or the teachings of the Church either iconically or with idolatry (though much more would have to be said than I can say here in order to give a sense of what treating them in either way would mean). An icon is always such for a particular person or group at a time and in a place (hence indexicality), and is always such in virtue of the relations it is instrumental in establishing between acts of human understanding and the reality of God (hence relationality).

It follows that in saying that Christian representations (whether conceptual or linguistic) of the life of the world to come should always be iconic, I raise the empirical question of whether the concepts that order the representations of this matter that we most commonly use (heaven, hell, the kingdom of God, eternal life, the resurrection of the body) are in fact at the moment usually iconic for Christians. I rather doubt that they are, though it is always very difficult to tell in any particular instance of their use just how they are being used. A half-awareness of the non- or anti-iconic use of such representations is a partial explanation of the contemporary uneasiness on the part of many theologians about such representations, and their resulting attempts to restrain and constrain their use in popular piety, and to interpret them in such a way that they need not imply idolatry or suggest excessively detailed claims to knowledge in the sphere of final eschatology.²²

The main problem, I suspect, is that we Christians narrativize our final-eschatological representations too quickly and too easily, and in so doing turn them into idols. We improperly extend the sense we have of our own identity here below, a sense unavoidably given to us narratively, into the life of the world to come, and end by asking questions of the same kind as those asked of Jesus by the Sadducees. Shall I see my dead father again? Will I be reconciled with my estranged child? Will my beloved dog and I be reunited? Shall I have in heaven the healthy body that I had at twenty, or the decayed and painful one I have now, at eighty? Such questions, familiar to those who deal pastorally with bereavement and approaching death, are almost unavoidably idolatrous.²³ Taking them as questions that we might be able to answer freezes the gaze upon an idolatrous narrative, and prevents the gaze from being led toward God's deep mercies, which will in fact complete us by lifting us out of the realm of narrative

into that of unnarratable eternity.

These idolatrous tendencies are in large part suggested to us by the very force of our narrative of God's creative and redemptive activity. We constantly tell and retell that story, so that it is written on our bodies as much as on our minds and hearts, and so that we begin to forget how to represent our faith to ourselves non-narratively (whether formally or iconically). We become compulsive singers of our tale, to the point where we forget that God's gift to us is not exhaustively constituted by the tale we sing (the tale has both *incipit* and *explicit*; God has neither), but always precedes, exceeds, and supersedes it. The liturgy, properly understood and participated in, reminds us of the limits of narrative as a representation of the content of faith; so also do some of the conceptual resources of the faith and some of its literary forms.²⁴ Among the former I have in mind the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, with its iconic presentation of the eternal and ceaseless exchange of gifts among the persons of the Trinity. And among the latter I have in mind the *carmina catenata* (chained poems) of John Donne and George Herbert, in which the last line of each stanza is the first line of the next, and the last line of the entire poem is also its first, with the result that the reading of the poem never ceases.²⁵ Such poems have no *telos* other than the continuous fact of being read; in this they iconically represent the life of the world to come, which likewise has no *telos* other than the ceaseless receiving of gifts from God and returning them to God.

But nonetheless, Christian resources for nonidolatrous representation of the life of the world to come stand in some need of renewal. We Christians have traditionally often looked outside the bounds of the Christian tradition for resources (conceptual and practical) when needs of this sort have become apparent. The Egyptians (a traditional type of the religious alien), Christians have often thought, possess resources of value for Christian purposes, gold that we can use to ornament the ark of the covenant.²⁶ When we find it-and because of the omnivorous nature of Christian thought we ought ceaselessly to be looking for it-we can and should appropriate (expropriate) it for our own constructive purposes. In so doing, of course, we are likely to transform it so that it becomes largely unrecognizable to those who originally mined and shaped it, just as women taken in war are to be transformed before they can be bedded, according to the Deuteronomic regulations on the matter.²⁷ In this spirit, I shall conclude this essay by asking what resources one group of contemporary Egyptians-the Buddhists-might have offer on this matter. Is there anything in Buddhist thought that might serve Christians as an iconic representation of their own end, as an icon of narrative closure that is not simple cessation?

Nirvana as Icon of the End

Nirvana, a Sanskrit word with an etymology that suggests 'blowing out' (of a candle flame) or 'extinction' (of a fire), has been naturalized into English since the nineteenth century with a wide range of meanings, including 'final beatitude', 'heaven', and 'blissful ecstasy'. It (and its translational equivalents in other Buddhist languages) was a central technical term in Buddhist systematic thought, a frequent object of representation in Buddhist art (as a city, a lake, a tower, an empty circle, and so on), and a device for providing an end to Buddhist narratives, most especially the narrative of the Buddha, which ends with his (physical) death, characterized as entry into Nirvana, his being 'nirvanized' in such a way that there are no more stories to tell about him, and no possibility of further interaction with him, as a living human being walking the earth.²⁸ 'Nirvana' has had a range of meanings and a kind of significance for Buddhists reasonably comparable with (and probably greater than) those of 'heaven' for Christians. It would therefore be absurd to attempt a survey of the range of the term's uses and the meanings attributed to it. Instead, I'll offer an interpretation of the term's principal syntactic uses within the broad framework of (Indian) Buddhist thought and practice. However, the interpretation offered, brief, schematic, and partial as it must be, is not intended primarily as a tool to permit better understandings of Buddhism (though it can be so used), but rather as an icon that may be of use to Christian thinkers for the purposes already mentioned.²⁹

Buddhist systematic thought presents each person's history as beginningless, though as capable of coming to an end.³⁰ Until the end comes (if it does), every moment of these infinitely many human histories is characterized, always and necessarily, by ignorance (*avidya*) of the true state of the universe and of the place within it of the particular history to which it belongs; by a complex of passionate attachment to (*raga*), aversion from (*dvesa*), and confusion about (*moha*) the particular things with which it has been, is, or may be in causal contact; and by an unremitting unsatisfactoriness or unpleasantness (*duhkha*). Further, each event in this history is transient, or impermanent (*anitya*), rapidly and inevitably ceasing to be just what it is and becoming something else. This beginningless progression of impermanence is punctuated by death, again and again (*punarmrtyu*), each death being a prelude to a new birth and a subsequent death. The principle forces perpetuating this beginningless continuum are passionate desire for more of precisely those things intrinsic to it (food, sex, wealth, power, status, reputation), and deep ignorance about the true nature of this desire and its effects.³¹ Specifying the best way to think about the relation between these two (desire and ignorance) is one of the main tasks of Buddhist philosophical psychology.

Given the understanding of narrative in play in this essay, the events of any particular human history (or of the collectivity of all human histories) cannot, on the view of them given in the preceding paragraph, be narrated. This is because they cannot be emplotted: there is no progression, no *telos*, no

possibility of completion or truncation, no sense of an ending. Instead, there is only infinitely more of the same, a beginningless and endless series that can be represented annalistically, logged, recorded, enumerated, listed, checked off-but not narrated. The icon of Nirvana is what, for Buddhist thought, makes narrative possible. It is what comes at the end, what marks the ending, and thereby what permits the transformation of an annal into a narrative. It can do this because, formally, it is defined consistently as the absence of all the marks by which the beginningless series is understood and defined. It is the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion; the absence of ignorance; the end of death (and so also of birth); the replacement of unsatisfactoriness with its contradictory, which is delight and bliss (*ananda, sukha*); and the transformation of impermanence into permanence (*nityata*). When Gautama Sakyamuni, the Buddha for our world and time, enters Nirvana (is nirvanized, *parinivṛta*), this is what happens to him: this is the culmination of his history, as it is also the potential culmination of each of ours. It is what makes it possible to tell his story-or, more precisely, it is the condition of the possibility of his having a story at all, rather than only a sequence without end or beginning.

Formal negations of the kind mentioned in the preceding paragraph are quite central to Buddhist representations of Nirvana, though Buddhists do not (any more than Christians) limit their representations of the culmination of individual life to these apophatic formalities. Nirvana is also represented in iconic images (verbal and visual) as the perfect city, the extinction of a blazing fire, the bottomless ocean, the perfect sun, the full moon, and so on.³² But images, and the conventions governing their presentation and appropriation, are unlike apophatic formalities in having deep and very particular cultural roots; they cannot easily or quickly be transported from one master text to another, and if the deployment of Buddhist iconic images for Nirvana is a possibility for Christians at all, within the syntactic and semantic bounds of the Christian master text, this will happen only after they have been read into the Christian account, inscribed into its margins, by the kind of deep reading mentioned at the beginning of this essay. That is a long and difficult process, and not one even to sketch the lineaments of here.³³

It is easier with apophatic formalities: that kind of Egyptian gold requires less hard work in the smithy to make it suitable for the ornamentation of the ark. For the Buddhist master text, then, we can say that whatever properties are predicated of human existence without Nirvana are negated of such existence within Nirvana. This is a familiar move: it does for Buddhists syntactically exactly what (for example) Paul's characterization of the resurrected body does for Christians. For Paul, the resurrected body is represented formally by predicating of it the contradictories of all those properties that belong to the pre-resurrection body. For the Buddhist master text, Nirvana as the end (culmination) of life can be represented formally by predicating of it the contradictories of all those properties that belong to unnirvanized human history. Syntactically, the result is the same: the marking of an end, and the

concomitant opening of a space into which systematic thought can make no further incursions without producing aporias.

This is not, of course, to say that the formal characterization which Christians do (or should) give to the life of the world to come is in every respect identical to that given by Buddhists to Nirvana. These formal characterizations are identical only in the syntactic senses mentioned; in every other they are deeply different. The most important differences are given by the differences (incompatibilities) in the substantive content of what is negated in each case. Most basically, the Buddhist master text negates properties that belong to a sequence without beginning, while the Christian master text negates properties that belong to one with beginning. This means that, without Nirvana, human histories as understood by Buddhism can only terminate or continue indefinitely: neither truncation nor completion is possible for them. But for Christianity, even without the completion of the life of the world to come, truncation is possible, and termination is not. From this deep syntactic difference stem the many more particular differences in what is negated.

Nonetheless, the syntax of the Buddhist master text is, by and large, clearer than that of the Christian one in this matter of apophatic formality, and as a result it may serve as a usable conceptual icon for Christians in thinking about (and seeing through) our own characterizations of the life of the world to come. Conceptually (formally), the principal temptation for Christians with respect to making claims about the life of the world to come has been (and remains) that of saying too much in a narrative way, of not being clear about the necessity for epistemic modesty and for taking the silence produced by such modesty as an opportunity rather than a problem.

Consider the following four negations as a potential conceptual icon of the life of the world to come: (i) it is not the case that the resurrected body exists; (ii) it is not the case that the resurrected body does not exist; (iii) it is not the case that the resurrected body both exists and does not exist; (iv) it is not the case that the resurrected body neither exists nor does not exist. This is a version of the Buddhist tetralemma (*catuskoti*), a set of alternatives designed to delineate and then to negate all the possible conceptual alternatives in thinking about whether a particular predicate (in this case 'exists') can be applied to a particular subject (in this case 'the resurrected body').³⁴ Some aporias result (or they may), but it is not the burden of this essay to pursue them. Rather, the point is that this fourfold set of negations can be iconic, a representation through which God gazes at us and leads our gaze toward him without freezing it upon some representation which is other than him-upon an idol. This is not, of course, how the Buddhist master text uses this fourfold set semantically; but it is not far from its use of these negations syntactically, since one of the subjects to which the fourfold negation is applied is the existence of the Buddha after he has entered Nirvana (become nirvanized).

It might be objected that Christians ought to say that the second of the four alternatives given in the preceding paragraph is the true one. But, as is

implied by what has already been said about apophatic formalities, the verb 'to exist' cannot be applied univocally to the body I have now and the body I shall have then. One of the iconic functions of the tetralemma as applied to the resurrected body, then, is that it prevents (or suggests the possibility of preventing) the freezing of the conceptual gaze upon the predicate 'exists' with respect to the resurrected body, and as a result checks (or might check) the temptation to construct narratives about the career of that body.

Expropriating this tetralemma from its Buddhist context and making it into a Christian icon for the life of the world to come is best thought of as providing a new illuminated decoration in the margin of the sacred page.³⁵ Decorating the sacred page in ways such as this is among the most exciting and challenging tasks for Christian theology in the immediate future, an essential part of coming to understand better how to represent iconically what cannot be represented discursively. And while this essay has self-consciously avoided treating transitional eschatology, including every variety of chiliasm, it may not be inappropriate to end with the pious (but sapiential)³⁶ hope that the new millennium, now beginning, may be characterized by increasing effort on the part of Christian theologians, as our knowledge of the particulars of the thought and practice of religious aliens increases, to use Egyptian gold to decorate the sacred page more lavishly and to ornament the ark of the covenant more gorgeously.

NOTES

¹ Thanks for comments and suggestions are due to K. Beise, J. Buckley, J. Heyhoe, D. Jeffreys, J. Walls, and C. Zaleski.

² Following Frank Kermode's fine phrase in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford, 1966), 45.

³ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 6.

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg has some interesting and entirely correct observations on the necessarily metaphorical nature of the apocalyptic language used in what I am calling transitional eschatology. See *Systematische Theologie*, Band III (Göttingen, 1993), 667-668 = *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998), 621-622.

⁵ It's not clear how best to understand *bereshith*. Better might be, "As [God] was beginning ...". See the texts translated in A. J. Rosenberg, *Genesis, A New English Translation: Translation of Text, Rashi, and Other Commentators* (New York, 1993), 2-7.

⁶ On these syntactic points I have been influenced by (and largely follow) Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (Einsiedeln, 1986), transl. David Kipp & Lothar Krauth in *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (San Francisco, 1988)

⁷ There are some obvious exceptions to this principle for Catholic and Orthodox

Christians, at least with respect to people who have died (Mary and the saints). Perhaps there are none for at least some Protestant Christians.

⁸ I follow Jürgen Moltmann here in emphasizing the life of the world to come as a new beginning. For Moltmann, Christian eschatology has not to do with ends or last things, but rather with new beginnings, just as the 'end' of Christ was his resurrection. Moltmann is worried about the diversion of interest and attention from the exercise of our historically situated and narratable freedom that may result from thinking about eschatology as the end of history, time, and narrative. But no such diversion need result; the key point, that eschatology must involve thought about the end of narratable time, is acknowledged by Moltmann, for example in *Das Kommen Gottes: Christliche Eschatologie* (Gütersloh, 1995), 12 = *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, 1996), xi. His further claim that the eschaton of individuals must be thought of as the "Anfang der ewigen Geschichte des Lebens" can be accepted so long as "Geschichte" does not involve or require narratable sequence (as "ewige" suggests that it may not).

⁹ For histories of such representations see: Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, 1988); Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, 1997).

¹⁰ "Der Tod is kein Ereignis des Lebens. Den Tod erlebt man nicht." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.431.

¹¹ Carol Zaleski, *The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope* (New York, 1996).

¹² Zaleski, *Life*, 28 & passim, has some useful and penetrating things to say about the strictly evocative function of eschatological symbols.

¹³ Zaleski, *Life*, 34-35.

¹⁴ It might seem that my emphasis upon the rejection of narrative representation runs counter to Zaleski's interest in the narratives of near-death experience, evident both in *Life* and in her earlier work, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York, 1987). But I do not think that it does; those matters have to do with what I am calling transitional eschatology rather than with final eschatology, and narrative is perfectly appropriate for the representation of transitional eschatology-though even there Pannenberg's aforementioned emphasis upon the importance of understanding (transitional) eschatological language as metaphorical should be taken to heart.

¹⁵ These points (to be developed below) are intended only in friendly amendment to and development of Zaleski's argument.

¹⁶ The parenthetical phrase is intended to preserve neutrality on the complex question of an intermediate (embodied? disembodied?) state between physical death and final resurrection. Peter van Inwagen's recent philosophical and exegetical arguments to the effect that Christians need believe neither in such an intermediate state nor in a disembodied state are powerful. See his *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, Colorado, 1998), 45-67. These arguments may usefully be compared with a now widely-canvassed theological position, developed from that enunciated by Benedict XII in 1336 in

the Bull *Benedictus Deus*, to the effect that entry into eternity follows for every individual immediately upon death (*animae sanctorum omnium ... mox post mortem suam ... etiam ante resurrectionem suorum corporum et iudicium generale post ascensionem Salvatoris Domini nostri Iesu Christi in caelum, fuerunt, sunt, et erunt in caelo, caelorum regno et paradiso caelesti cum Christo ...*, Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 1000; with the same rapidity but different particulars those who die in mortal sin enter upon their eternal destiny). On this see Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatologie Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg, 1977), 91-135 = *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 104-161; Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, Band III, 641-654 = *Systematics*, Vol.3, 577-580; Moltmann, *Kommen Gottes*, 74-96 = *Coming of God*, 58-77.

¹⁷ On the strict unimaginability of personal immortality see, convincingly, Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in idem, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge, 1973), 82-100.

¹⁸ Paul exhibits a similar epistemic modesty with respect to what he can properly say about his experience of being "caught up into paradise" (2 Cor 12:1-7).

¹⁹ Compare the use of the mirror-image in a reversed sense in 2 Cor 3:18, and Jean-Luc Marion's comments thereon in *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte* (Paris, 1982), 34-35 = *God Without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago, 1991), 21-22.

²⁰ In this sketchy characterization of the iconic I rely upon Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 15-37 = *God Without Being*, 7-24; and Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, New York, 1996), especially 44-68. The deeper background to Florensky's treatment of icons is in his *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton, 1996). Donald Davidson's analysis of metaphor, found in "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 31-47, has some deep analogies (though couched in a very different idiom) to Marion's (and to a lesser extent Florensky's) analysis of the icon.

²¹ Poetic representation of such recursively deconstructive tendencies can be seen in many of George Herbert's poems. See, e.g., "The Altar." Stanley Fish is good on this aspect of Herbert. See his *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, 1972); *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley, 1978).

²² Such uneasiness is among the motivations for Karl Rahner's influential theory about how eschatological assertions should be interpreted. See his "Theologische Prinzipien der Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Band IV (Einsiedeln, 1960), 401-428. = "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in *Theological Investigations*, Volume IV (Baltimore, 1966), 323-346. But Rahner's view, which is that eschatological statements can be established solely by a method of extrapolation from what is implied by the present self-knowledge of Christians, and that the content of what little eschatological knowledge we have is just and only what knowledge of the future is needed for the present self-understanding of Christians (see his fourth thesis), goes too far. Rather, eschatology has as its primary content what God will do;

and its theses are established not only by appeal to present self-understanding in Christ, but also by attention to what God has done and is doing by way of making that future present. On this see Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, Band III, 585-587 = *Systematics*, Vol.3, 543-544.

²³ Of course it does not follow from the fact that such questions are typically idolatrous that indicating this is always the proper thing to do, pastorally speaking. Better to turn the questioner's attention toward the potentially iconic representations of comfort to be found in the Church's prayers and lamentations, and most especially those found in the Psalms.

²⁴ Liturgical reform sometimes forgets this, smoothing out the iconically repetitive moments of the eucharistic celebration-moments in which what is done is done again, in a liturgical stammer of repeated approach to and withdrawal from God, repeated reception of God's gift and return of that gift to the giver, in an iconic representation-in-action of the life of the world to come-in the interests of providing a smooth narrative curve to the celebration. On this, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998).

²⁵ See, inter alia, Donne's "La Corona" (an icon of salvation), and Herbert's "Sinnes Round" (an icon of damnation). See also Henri de Lubac, *The Christian Faith*, transl. Richard Arnandez (San Francisco, 1986), 245-246, on the Apostles' Creed as a circle whose end requires a new start at its beginning-something very close to a *carmen catenatum*, though de Lubac does not use the phrase.

²⁶ The metaphor of Egyptian gold is derived from patristic exegesis of Exodus 3:22, 11:2, 12:35-36, 25:1-7, 32:1-4, 35:4-9, 20-29. See, inter alia, Origen's letter to Gregory, Migne, *Patrologia Graecae*, vol.11, cols.86-92, translated in vol.X of the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, 388-390; Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ii.60.

²⁷ See, e.g., Jerome, Epistle 70, Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, vol.22, cols.664-668, especially 666 (discussing Deut 21:10-14).

²⁸ There are scholastic difficulties here with the difference between *nirvana* and *parinirvana* (for an excellent discussion of which based on Pali materials see Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* [Cambridge, 1998], 147-151, 191-198); a partial parallel in Indian scholastic thought is the distinction between the removal of the *klesavarānani* (affective obstacles) and that of the *jñeyavarānani* (obstacles to what needs to be known), on which see Paul J. Griffiths et al., *The Realm of Awakening: A Translation and Study of Chapter Ten of Asanga's Mahayanasāgraha* (New York, 1989), 65, 75, 244-245. But it would be out of place to pursue these distinctions here. Also, to say that there is no further interaction with the Buddha after he has been nirvanized is very much to over-simplify. Indian Buddhist theorists found complicated and interesting ways of specifying the possibility of such interactions (for a presentation and discussion of which see my *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany, New York, 1994). But these conceptual moves do not call into question the claim that Nirvana ends the narrative of the Buddha.

²⁹ Among primary sources I've drawn mostly upon the discussions in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa* and its commentaries, ed. Dwarikadas Shastri, *Abhidharmakosa and Bhasya of Acarya Vasubandhu and Sphutartha Commentary of Acarya Yasomitra* (Varanasi, 1981), especially i.4-6, vi.67-75. The analysis in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, together with Candrakirti's *Prasannapada*, ed. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Madhyamakavrtti: Mulamadhyamakakarikas (Madhyamika-sutras) de Nagarjuna avec la Prasannapada, commentaire de Candrakirti* (St. Petersburg, 1913), especially ch.xxv, provides a good example of the provision of a pattern of argument that could itself be used as a conceptual icon.

³⁰ The history of the universe is also beginningless; there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a Buddhist cosmogony. But in accord with the limitations of this essay, I shall restrict the remarks that follow to the implications of the conceptual icon of Nirvana for individual final eschatology. There are implications for universal eschatology, too, but they are beyond my scope here.

³¹ This diagnosis is of course not limited to human histories but to all those that involve sentience. There are difficult and interesting questions about the limits of sentience here, on which see Lambert Schmithausen, *The Problem of the Sentience of Plants in Buddhism* (Tokyo, 1991).

³² The best treatments of these and other images are in Collins, *Nirvana*, and in the same author's earlier work, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge, 1982). Interesting comparisons may be made with standard similes for Buddha's action, given at length in E. H. Johnston, ed., *The Ratnagotravibhaga Mahayanottaratantrasastra* (Patna, 1950), 102-110. See my discussion in *On Being Buddha*, ch.4

³³ Much of the history of western attempts to interpret Buddhist representations of Nirvana have been marked by an attempt to resolve conceptual aporias without realizing that the representations are to be taken iconically. See Collins, *Nirvana*, for this point in different language. An entrée into the history of western interpretation may be had from Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago, 1968).

³⁴ There is a substantial literature on the *catuskoti*. A beginning may be made with David Seyfort Rugg, "The Uses of the Four Positions of the Catuskoti and the Problem of the Description of Reality in Mahayana Buddhism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 5 (1977), 1-71.

³⁵ Buddhists may, of course, do something entirely similar with Christian materials for their own purposes (I hope that they will: what could be more interesting?), but only those engaged in constructive work within the bounds of the Buddhist master text have the right and the duty to do it and to say how it should go.

³⁶ "Ecce pietas est sapientia," Augustine, *Confessiones*, v.5.