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The Enlightenment: Historical Skepticism and Religious Faith

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century movement in Western intellectual thought that established norms for understanding reality and defining what is or is not true.

“Enlightenment thinking” is characterized by a commitment to reason and an appeal to empirical observation. Enlightenment thinkers valued reason and observation over appeals to tradition or authority. They were not willing to accept a proposition as true or valid simply because it had the backing of political or religious authorities.

The Enlightenment introduced the modern notion of critical thinking. Truth claims became subject to scrutiny and appeals to tradition or authority ceased to be as persuasive for establishing such claims as “sound arguments” based on reason and/or empirical observation.

The Enlightenment encouraged disciplined scholarship that adhered to well-defined methods for testing and verifying hypotheses. This new orientation led to tremendous advances in science and mathematics, but it posed special problems for religion.

One lasting legacy of the Enlightenment for Western thought has been a distrust of assertions that cannot be verified. Accordingly, a challenge of the Enlightenment to Christianity has involved the

development of a historical method for evaluating what should properly be defined as “historical truth.”

First, the Enlightenment orientation distinguishes between potentially verifiable statements about historical events and speculative interpretations regarding the significance of those events:

- “Jesus died on a cross” claims to state a historical fact.
- “Jesus died for our sins” does not claim to state a historical fact.

The first claim belongs to the realm of history, and the second to the realm of speculative faith or religion. The first is potentially verifiable; the second is not. The first might be regarded as a fact; the second can be regarded only as an opinion.

Second, the Enlightenment orientation seeks for verification of statements about historical events according to criteria of historical research, apart from any appeal to tradition (“the church has always taught that this happened”) or authority (“the Bible says this happened”) or revelation (“God says this happened”):

- “Jesus taught in parables”: usually accepted as a verifiable historical fact
- “Jesus was born to a virgin”: usually not accepted as a verifiable historical fact

From the nineteenth century on, Christians would discover that (1) many of their faith claims had come to be regarded as merely

speculative opinions, and (2) many of their propositions about history (on which faith claims were often based) had come to be regarded as unverifiable tenets.

The challenge for modern Christians is to define their faith as true in a culture where the validity of opinions and assertions is not typically maintained through appeals to tradition, authority, or revelation.