

How “the Enlightenment” was Invented

It is generally taught that the Enlightenment happened between 1680 and 1800 and that this time therefore is “the age of Enlightenment”. While the church had prevented the development of reason and progress during the “dark ages”, so the story goes, because the heroes of the Enlightenment employed reason (in contrast to the Christians who submitted to the Bible and to authority), the natural sciences developed, philosophy came to flourish, and freedom of opinion and freedom of religion were introduced. This talk will demonstrate that there is nearly no truth in this widespread and powerful story. It was created in order to make the church look anti-rational and in order to make the ground infertile for the gospel. More generally, it will criticise the tradition of approaching history in terms of “epochs” and “progress” and sketch an alternative, Christian approach.

Daniel von Wachter (www.von-wachter.de) is professor and director of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein (www.iap.li). He is German and studied philosophy and theology at Munich, Liechtenstein, Innsbruck, Hamburg, and Oxford. Before he moved to Liechtenstein, he was a professor in Chile. Metaphysics and philosophy of religion are the main areas of his research. His method is within what is associated with analytic philosophy, but he places himself in the broader tradition of European philosophy, especially Protestant scholasticism and the non-deterministic philosophers of the 18th century.

I. The usual teaching about the Enlightenment

- A. 1680 – 1800 was the age of the Enlightenment.
- B. In the Enlightenment, people valued and followed reason significantly more than before, in the “dark ages”.
- C. The Enlightenment taught and it is true that belief in a revealed way to salvation is against reason.
- D. In the Enlightenment philosophy flourished and became rational, while before it was linked to religion.
- E. Science was developed or promoted in the Enlightenment.
- F. Freedom of religion is an achievement of the Enlightenment.

II. Conceptual critique

- A. “Enlightenment” is used as a label for a period and for claims. How many of the learned held these views? Those who did not are ignored.

- B. The term entails a positive evaluation. Dictionaries, which should only report who said what, present these ideas as obviously true.
- C. The Enlightenment is said to have begun 1680. But the term “Aufklärung” arose after 1770 and “Enlightenment” even later.
- D. Thesis: The Enlightenment was constructed 1780-1900 in order to create the impression that Christianity is against reason and that science and freedom were achieved against the Christians. The least orthodox of the 18th century were included.

III. What happened actually?

- A. In the 17th century there was lively philosophy, aiming at precision and argument. “Protestant scholasticism”. Ignored today.
- B. In the 18th century there were many eminent philosophers who did not hold the Enlightenment views. Ignored today.
- C. Even those who are taken to belong to the Enlightenment, e.g. John Lock, Christian Thomasius, and Christian von Wolff, believed in the Christian revelation. Only people like Voltaire and Kant believed that they brought light into darkness.

IV. Conclusion

- A. Christians (and others) should be critical of myths like “the Enlightenment”.
Ask: Who said and did what?
- B. Beware of attempts to create, without giving arguments, the impression that Christianity is irrational.
- C. Christians should not endorse the idea of epochs, which suggests too much homogeneity.
- D. Christians should not adopt the non-Christian canon. Read the forgotten Christian philosophers, e.g. Joseph Butler, John Bramhall, Samuel Clarke, George Campbell, Thomas Chalmers, Johann Georg Walch, Christian August Crusius, and many more.

Suggested Readings:

Daniel von Wachter, “Die Aufklärung existiert nicht”,

http://sammelpunkt.philo.at/2585/1/Wachter_2017-Aufklaerung-k.pdf