

# The enlightenment shaping of contemporary christian thought

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The purpose of this paper is to account for significant changes brought about by the rise of Enlightenment philosophy on the 18th century Christian theology, with particular attention being paid to the issues of Biblical criticism. The author emphasizes the influence of Enlightenment philosophy of the treatment of such theological issues as the Bible interpretation, the figure of Jesus, and salvation and afterlife themselves.

Keywords: Christianity, Enlightenment, philosophy of religion, theology, theism, deism

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The 18th century marked a decisive epistemological break with the previously dominant notions of sense of human life, of salvation and sin, of religion and irreligion. Whereas in 1600, the Biblical account of creation, original sin, and salvation was accepted as literally true, this was no longer the case in 1800. This essay attempts to show how the paradigmatic shift from authority-based interpretation of Biblical teachings to the rationalistic one has taken place, and what role the wider philosophical tradition of Enlightenment has played in this development. According to Olson (2011), the Enlightenment philosophy may be distinguished by its theretofore unprecedented assumption that reality could and should be viewed not through the lens of certain established authority or tradition but from the point of view of human reason's apparently unlimited cognitive capacity (2011, p. 6). In contrast with traditionalist notions of inherent limitability of human mind imposed both by God's will and the original sin, the Enlightenment celebrated human reason, viewing it as the most perfect epistemological instrument.

Their ideas on critical and autonomous (reality-discovering) capacities of human reason proved crucial in shaping the West's intellectual climate (Olson, 2011, p. 9). Subsequently, major Enlightenment thinkers were either openly hostile or at least skeptical with respect to the Church's claims on possessing absolute knowledge and mastery of all matters spiritual and natural due to the revelation given to it by God. This would be especially evident in these philosophers' take on Biblical criticism. Challenging the literal interpretation of the Bible, the leading figures of German Enlightenment such as Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Johan Salomo Semler, Johann Gottfried Herder, or Herman Samuel Reimarus, put forward the view of the Bible as a historically conditioned artifact (Davaney, 2006, pp.

14-15). The German Enlighteners came to understand the Scriptures as a collection of disparate writings and documents, the authors whereof were necessarily distant from the events and characters they purported to explain or narrate. In addition to the notion of temporal gap between the supposed Biblical history and the time of the Biblical writings' creation, the supporters of historical criticism denied the idea of supernatural knowledge, or revelation, as the basis for sacred history offered in the Bible (Olson, 2011, p. 15). As the Biblical writers were found to be limited by their times, the idea of universality of Bible's revelation was put under question. The figure of Jesus as the Divine savior was the next to come under critical scrutiny.

First, the historical criticism of the Bible disputed the common affirmation of Christ as Messiah promised in the Old Testament, as the latter was found to include several conflicting perspectives, some of them not culminating in

Messianic promises (Olson, 2011, p. 17). The majority of the Enlighteners came to understand Jesus as a human endowed with spectacular moral and ethical qualities, preaching his Gospel as a method of living in accordance with the natural religion principles. In particular, John Toland, a famous representative of the English Enlightenment, interpreted Christ's mission as a purely moralist one, effectively denying the notions of both Jesus' miraculous birth and his supernatural mission of salvation (Rewentlow, 2010, pp. 71-72).

Similarly, Reimarus argued against the idea of Christ's resurrection, pointing at contradictions in the respective Scriptural texts to substantiate his claim (2010, p. 161). Finally, the concepts of salvation and after-life themselves were re-imagined by the Enlightenment philosophers and theologians. John Locke had already rejected the views of original sin as inherited from Adam and Eve and of Christ's sacrifice as the means of bringing about the salvation, interpreting it instead as the form of moral example for mastering the flesh (Rewentlow, 2010, p. 65). The idea of the Christian's "union" with the God, based on following the Scripture's ethical requirements, was likewise equated with salvation in German Protestantism of that time, where it was developed by Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (Sorkin, 2008, p.

131). As for the notion of after-life, the latter was not rejected but downplayed. While Reimarus viewed the immortality and imperishability of a human soul as an integral component of natural religion (Rewentlow, 2010, p. 160), such thinkers as Condorcet or Diderot questioned the very idea of soul's immortality, giving rise to modern atheistic concepts of human

consciousness. Therefore, the Enlightenment led to major transformation of Christian theology and the rise of modern philosophy of religion. By rejecting the literalist view of the Scriptures and the revelation-based approach to the notion of the sacral, the Enlighteners helped bring about the dominance of rationalist worldview that was to prove instrumental in shaping modern religious and philosophical consciousness.