

Understanding Christian Apologetics

Lesson 14: Can We Know History?

Responding to Subjectivism / Relativism / Postmodernism

I. Historical Knowledge in a Postmodern Context¹

A. The historical nature of the Christian religion

1. Distinguished by being rooted in real events of history
2. Its claims can be verified by historical evidence

B. Challenges in knowing the past

1. “Since the past is forever gone, it can neither be viewed directly nor reconstructed precisely or exhaustively. Accordingly historians cannot verify the truth of a hypothesis in an absolute sense. Our knowledge of the past comes exclusively through sources. This means that, to an extent, our only link to the past is through the eyes of someone else, a person who had his or her own opinions and agendas.”²
2. How we can learn anything about the past with any degree of assurance?
3. How can we have any level of confidence about the historical basis of the Christian faith?

C. Emergence of historical relativism

1. Based on contention that it is impossible to objectively establish events of the past
2. The only thing we can know are reconstructions of the past, not the past itself

¹ This lesson is based on chapter 5 of William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*.

² Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 31.

3. No one reconstruction can claim to be superior to alternate reconstructions

D. Historical relativism is a sub-species of postmodernism

1. French sociologist Jean-François Lyotard define postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives”
2. A metanarrative is a grand narrative that a person adopts in order to make sense of the world; in other words, it is a worldview
3. Postmodernism says that all worldviews are equally valid because they are only attempts to create meaning
4. “According to postmodernism, nothing we think we know can be checked against reality as such... All language is a human construct. We can’t determine the ‘truthfulness’ of the language, only the usefulness... In short, the only kind of truth there is is pragmatic truth. There is no truth of correspondence... No one’s story is truer than anyone else’s story. Does the story work? That is, does it satisfy the teller? Does it get you what you want — say, a sense of belonging, a peace with yourself, a hope for the future, a way to order your life? It’s all one can ask.”³

E. Basic problems with postmodernism

1. It is self-contradictory
 - a) Its rejection of all metanarratives is itself a metanarrative
 - b) Its critique of modernism’s reliance upon the autonomy of human reason is rooted in the autonomy of human reason
2. It cannot account for itself: “it tells us something, that on its own account, we can’t know”⁴

II. The Main Objections Raised by Historical Relativism

³ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 179, 180.

⁴ Sire, 188.

- A. We cannot directly observe the past (no direct access)
1. “In what sense can I be said to know an event which is in principle unobservable, having vanished behind the mysterious frontier which divides the present from the past? And how can we be sure that anything really happened in the past at all, that the whole story is not an elaborate fabrication, as untrustworthy as a dream or a work of fiction?” [cited on 219]
 2. Historical knowledge cannot measure up to the standards of objectivity required in scientific inquiry
 3. Historical events really only exist in the mind, not in the past
 4. Because these events have no meaning in themselves, the historian puts his own meaning on them
 5. In its most radical, postmodern form, this means there is no past-in-itself but only a past-for-me
- B. We cannot objectively reconstruct the past (no neutrality)
1. “Historical syntheses depend to a very large degree not only upon the personality of their authors, but upon all the social, religious, or national environments which surround them. It follows, therefore, that each historian will establish between the facts relationships determined by the convictions, the movements, and the prejudices that have molded his own point of view.” [cited on 222]
 2. Every historian makes his assessment of the past through the lenses of his present context

III. Assessment

- A. Lack of direct access makes it impossible to know the past-in-itself
1. Flies in the face of common sense: we naturally believe that the world existed before we got here and that it will continue after we

are gone

2. The postmodern claim that the only historical reality is the one that we construct with our language is self-refuting, since it is a claim that purports to describe reality as it really is
 3. Opens the door to evil distortions of history (e.g. Chinese authorities denying that the Tiananmen Square massacres happened; Holocaust deniers)
 4. The residue of the past is directly accessible to the historian (archaeological data; cultural developments; human memories)
 5. Historical facts do exist outside our minds and make an impact regardless of our memory of them
 6. Our descriptions of events can have varying degrees of accuracy, but this does not alter the events themselves
 7. Historical hypotheses can be tested by their logical consistency and their ability to explain the evidence when compared to alternative hypotheses
- B. Lack of neutrality makes it impossible to know the past-in-itself
1. Inconsistency in application
 - a) Not even the most radical postmodern historians are willing to say that there is no common core of historical facts that everyone needs to accept
 - b) Postmodernism is self-refuting because its “theories claim to tell us what is the case about history (and thus invoke the idea of truth); claim that their accounts better fit the evidence than do their rivals’ (and thus invoke the idea of objectivity); and claim to reveal something about the way things are (and thus invoke the idea of reality).” [cited on 241]
 2. It is possible to distinguish between history and propaganda

- a) E.g. — Stalin had Russian history rewritten so that it was he and Lenin, rather than Trotsky and Lenin, who led the Bolshevik Revolution
- b) It would not be possible to make this distinction if facts have no meaning in themselves
- c) Consider the totalitarian society described in George Orwell's *1984*:

"There is a Party slogan dealing with control of the past," O'Brien said. "Repeat it, if you please."

"Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past," repeated Winston obediently.

"Who controls the present controls the past," said O'Brien, nodding his head with slow approval... "I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth *is* truth."

- 3. It is possible to criticize poor history
- 4. Various factors can mitigate the lack of neutrality [237]
 - a) Proper use of historical method
 - b) Public acknowledgement of one's point of view and methodology
 - c) Peer review by other historians
 - d) Letting hostile experts test hypotheses
 - e) Acknowledgement of a minimal set of historical facts that all contemporary historians take for granted

- f) Making a serious effort to detach oneself from one's biases
5. Note that the lack of neutrality argument goes in the other direction too, as a naturalist's biases make it impossible for him to accept the miraculous events recorded in the Bible