

Although the topic of “spiritual combat” has been touched on before, it is still helpful to begin with the question of: what is it? Combat implies a struggle – a struggle for what? As has been mentioned before, man’s deepest desire, one thing that applies to everyone, something so deeply embedded that you cannot possibly escape it is the desire for happiness. The drive for life – to be alive, to stay alive – is also very powerful in man. But the drive for happiness can overcome it. In the tragic case of suicide, someone is trying to relieve themselves of a terrible unhappiness. In the glorious case of martyrs, the person gives up their life so as not to lose ultimate happiness. So spiritual combat is a struggle for what? It is a struggle for happiness, ultimate, perfect, unending happiness. Man is meant for this ultimate happiness. Spiritual combat is the struggle necessary to attain to it.

Is this struggle something real? Does it pertain to the faith? Many of the good teachers of the faith, down through the history of the Church, have spoken and written in terms of “spiritual combat.” Indeed, Scripture itself speaks in these terms, especially the letters of St Paul. In Ephesians 6, for example, St Paul speaks of putting on the armor of God and man’s wrestling against forces bent on destroying him.

If someone hears the words of Paul or the term “spiritual combat” and thinks they are going to put up their dukes and fight the devil they have already lost. In order to understand rightly the nature of *spiritual* combat – what that means, what it entails, how it is engaged – we have to first understand our own selves, in particular the human soul. What separates man from animals is the capacity to think and choose freely (intellect and free will). If you set (say) a bowl of tomatoes and a bowl of beef in front of a dog, the dog does not sit there and contemplate his choice. The dog does not think: well, which one is the healthier choice? Is the beef well done or medium rare? Should I mix them together? Should I save some for later? Is the beef too expensive? Are the tomatoes salted? No, the dog just acts on instinct and goes after the beef. Now I might do the same thing but at least I have been given the capacity or capability of weighing those various questions. The dog does not contemplate his choice because he doesn’t have the capacity or ability to do so. The dog, acting on instinct, does not make a truly free choice because to do so implies the ability to contemplate the choice and then decide.

What is it that imparts this capacity to think and thus make a free choice? It is not DNA or some peculiarity of the human brain. While the body does participate in man’s thinking, the capacity to think and choose freely is a faculty of the human soul. One way to characterize the human body is as a complex communication device, like (in a certain sense) a phone. It takes in information through the bodily senses (just like someone else communicates themselves to you through a phone) and processes that information (in part through the brain). But thinking itself, leading to a conclusion or belief, is a spiritual (i.e., immaterial) act. It is an act of the soul.

This immediately tells us something about the nature of spiritual combat. While it can (and does) have several dimensions, it begins as a battle for the mind of man, for right belief, for truth, for belief that corresponds to actual reality. Our Lord Himself brings this out with His emphasis on teaching – His whole earthly life was one of teaching. His commission to the Apostles, to the Church, was: go out and *teach* all nations, baptizing them ... Teaching, learning, right belief – this precedes (& is part of) sanctification and arrival at ultimate happiness. Notice too how often our Lord speaks about and exhorts faith, which pertains to right belief.

It is not hard to see that the first level of spiritual combat is for right thinking or true belief. Suppose someone has to fight interiorly against temptations to wrath or lust or greed or whatever it is. To even engage that dimension of spiritual combat, the person has to first believe that their wrath or lust or greed is wrong.

Spiritual combat as a struggle for true belief was made evident from the very beginning of man’s existence – in the temptations of Eve. Notice that the tempter did not wave chocolate in front of Eve (the passions were not yet disordered), he did not threaten her, he did not use physical force. He was trying to (and of course did) sway her belief, her belief about God, His goodness, her belief about whether or not God could be trusted.

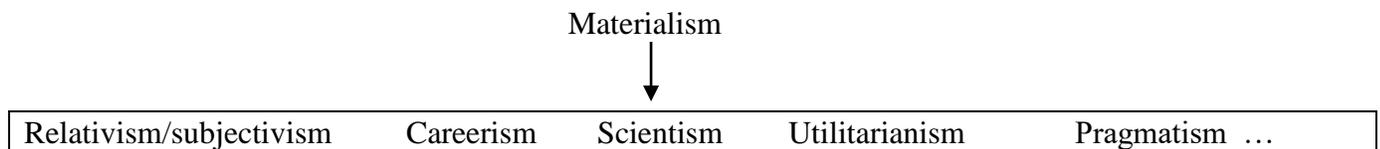
The same is true in every age, including our own. The first level of spiritual combat is a struggle for the mind of man – true belief vs falsehood. A person cannot go farther in spiritual combat, they cannot progress further towards ultimate happiness, without first possessing right belief. Eternal fate depends on the outcome.

While every age has had to engage spiritual combat, I think it's safe to say that not since the time of Christ has man been so badly defeated at this first and most basic level of spiritual combat – the level of right thinking, of true belief. A Catholic psychologist, writing on the topic of “sex psychology,” said that in the Middle Ages (for example) people did (of course) succumb to lustful temptations. But, he continued, in the past if (say) a man committed adultery, he knew he did wrong; if he was caught, he wouldn't try to justify it or say that it wasn't wrong. Today, this psychologist pointed out, that has changed. Modern man as a whole might be farther from true belief than even pagans were. At least pagans believed in some power greater than themselves.

How did this come about? More to the point, *what* exactly came about? What falsehoods have now become popular beliefs? These false beliefs do in fact have names, names like: rationalism, relativism, subjectivism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, scientism, careerism, secularism, and humanism – to name a few, perhaps the major ones of today. Very few people know these names – I certainly didn't prior to seminary – yet most people abide with them, believe them and follow them, to one degree or another. As one example, I have often asked high school CCD kids that if they were going to make one of two following statements, which would they use: Abortion is wrong (period), or: Abortion is wrong, *to me*. Almost always – in fact with only one exception – they answer the latter. It is an example of subjectivism or relativism (the two are very closely related) and yet these kids have never heard of relativism; no one has ever presented it to them and said: do you believe this?

I have been involved in religious education of youth at every parish I've been at. What I have found is that there are a good number of young people, from families that go to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day, decent kids who are not just smart-mouths or rebellious – and they are wondering if God even exists. Why? The reason is because we are surrounded by these false beliefs – it's what “everybody knows.” They are expressed in countless ways in all walks of life, especially media and entertainment. These beliefs then creep into a person's mind without the person even really realizing it. It's like a child learning language, it just happens, it's just absorbed, by being around it day in and day out. Once these beliefs are in a person's mind they act as a filter for everything else that a person encounters, including the faith. As such, they act like clogs in a water pipe that prevent the water (truth) from getting through because they are intrinsically atheistic.

We can speak about the truths of the faith until we're blue in the face but if these clogs – false beliefs like relativism – are in there, very little if any will get through. Take some area of sexual morality, say living together outside of marriage. Everybody's doing it, nobody cares or has any problem with it. People, especially young people, will just be bewildered if you say it's wrong. What's at the root of this popular belief? Any number of these popular mentalities – relativism, pragmatism, humanism – all of these coalesce to make what God says irrelevant. At the root of all these mentalities is what's called materialism. All of these various “philosophies” or popular beliefs are intrinsically materialistic. Materialism is the belief that material reality is the only reality; there is no such thing as immaterial or spiritual reality; thus, there is no such thing as God, the human soul, angels or demons. We could diagram all of these various “isms” like this:



Once materialism is given into, all the rest of these follow rather easily. However, the arrow above can be a double-headed arrow as well; as a person yields to all of the various popular mentalities in the box, they lead to an outright belief in materialism. So why would kids from faithful families wonder if God exists? It's because believing the false things in the box more and more – what “everybody knows” – leads more and more to a belief in materialism. Why would people be bewildered by God's teaching on sexual morality? At the root lies a question of who is God: the true God or me or man in general? There is a strong element of materialistic humanism in this question. The only cure is to bring these popular beliefs to light and then decide objectively whether or not you believe them. That will be the purpose of these articles.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*