

Last week's article left off with the question of how scientism came about. Dr Principe anchors its beginning or root with the French mathematician and "philosopher" Auguste Comte (1798-1857) so we will start there.

Comte's principle claim (out of which came all of his other claims) was "positivism." Although the reliability of Wikipedia might be questionable, especially on religion, it is perhaps helpful to have at least some outside reference for what's meant by positivism; Wikipedia, which *is* accurate in this case, describes it as follows:

"Positivism is a philosophical school that holds that all genuine knowledge is either true by definition or positive – meaning a posteriori facts, derived by reason and logic, from sensory experience. Other ways of knowing, such as intuition, introspection, or religious faith, are rejected or considered meaningless."

"From sensory experience" is a key part of what is meant by positivism. It means that the only things you can know about are those things that come directly through one of your 5 senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell); in other words, tangible, material things, things that are "directly" observable, or that can be measured or "observed" through some device like a microscope or something. "A posteriori facts" means basically the same thing; a posterior means roughly "afterwards." So the only conclusions you can make (or facts that you can believe), according to the claim of positivism, the only things you can believe, are those made after making observations of material reality; the only conclusions (facts) that are real are those made based on (made after) observing material reality. That's it, says positivism, there is no other true knowledge.

Before commenting on that, it might be helpful to present one more aspect of Comte's "philosophy" to help illustrate a main point. Comte, whose main interest was "sociology" declared what he called: "The Law of Human Progress." Man, Comte declared, *progresses* through 3 stages of development: Theological (or fictitious), Metaphysical or Philosophical, and then "Scientific." Religion or theology belongs to a primitive state of man, according to Comte, while "science" alone belongs to an advanced and mature state. Is this not a prevalent mindset amongst people today? Can you see the influence of Comte in our world today?

There are a number of things to especially note here. First of all, let's say that Comte's assessment of history is more or less a true account of what has happened. Who says that's "progress," that rejection of God and embrace of materialistic scientism is good, is progress? Comte provides no argument, no evidence of this – he simply declares it. So now here goes the whole Western world marching after some arbitrary claim for which no good argument has been put forth. The "enlightenment" is supposedly the age of reason. Is that reasonable? Some guy declares it, publishes it in some journal, and that makes it true? All the "smart" people say so and I don't want to look un-smart so I nod my head and say: uh-huh, oh yeah. It's not scientific, it's not reasonable; in terms of logical or "scientific" rigor, much less in terms of truth, it's ridiculous! It is also tyrannical: I declare it true, with no basis, therefore accept it. Of course. This is the nature of the isms. They all lead to the glorification of man (or at least, in this case, scientists) to the point where man (or at least those in with the crowd) is god. Since they are god, they can simply declare what is true – of course. Your role is to simply hand yourself over to them by bowing down and paying homage. Are the espousers and progenitors of the isms real atheists? Not really, they just believe that *they* are God. The New Atheism = The New Humanism.

The assumption of materialism, although not explicitly stated, is obvious. Why does, or how can, Comte just arbitrarily declare that the supposed "theological" stage of human or societal "development" is infantile and the "scientific" stage is the ultimate progression of man? It's because materialism is taken to be axiomatic – something that is obviously true and needs no proof. Says who? All of this is true for Comte's positivism as well, which is the basis for scientism.

Comte's "philosophy" is a reflection of the "spirit of the times" that was rampant in Europe (and spreading to the U.S.) in 1700 & 1800's, a "spirit" – a belief, a mentality – that said: this is the great new age of man, material well-being, throwing off the old restrictions of childish belief in God, man will now be a god unto himself, the decider of what is right and wrong, good and evil, without any reference to "some god."

We now live in the aftermath of the enlightenment. Is it good? Is it really progress? We have seen two world wars and countless other wars, the rise of Communism, a breakdown of marriage and family life, drugs are

epidemic, there is a fascination with death, the brutality of abortion and euthanasia are widely accepted, suicide and violence have risen; mobs who loot, rob, burn, and beat people are considered acceptable all too often. Is all of this good? Are people really happier now? In fact, are not many of these things the result of unhappiness? And none of this is even to mention the most severe consequence – a widespread loss of faith and thus eternal life. Yet many people will nod their head and say: oh yes, we are much better off now than 500 (or even 100) years ago. Why? Because people now look at only their material well-being, how much stuff they have; they could not live without their cell phones. It is the voice of materialism or at least practical materialism. Material betterment could just as well be brought about without rejecting God and thus without the negative consequences seen in society today. Man will not be happy, cannot be happy, until he learns to put his appetites in order, which our Lord calls us to do.

Let us return for a moment to Comte. His time and place of birth, the atmosphere in which he grew up and lived in, are not irrelevant to his so-called philosophy. Comte was born in France in 1798, that is – on the cusp of the French Revolution (1789-1799). As has been mentioned before, the French revolution was very anti-religious, anti-Catholic, anti-clerical. It was illegal, for example, to have Mass; the Holy Sacrifice was celebrated only in secret at people's houses and there would be severe consequences if they were caught. St John Vianney's family was one who hosted these clandestine Masses. Napoleon followed shortly after the French revolution. While Napoleon tolerated religion, it was still a tumultuous time in French history. And we have seen the "spirit of the times" prevalent throughout Europe in Comte's time. Now almost every author, if not every author, who writes about Comte and his "philosophy" acknowledges that Comte was heavily influenced by these circumstances. And here is the point...Comte is making universal claims – claims that are supposedly true always and everywhere (that's the nature of most philosophy), rules of nature, if you will, and yet he is looking (largely) at only his own time and circumstances, a small sliver of time and very specific circumstances. Does that make for credible claims about something being universally true? Is that sufficient? Suppose your child broke your coffee pot. Would you conclude that all children, everywhere and in all times, break coffee pots? No thinking person could take that seriously. Yet this is to a large degree exactly what Comte did. And he has had a heavy influence on modern beliefs. Do you dare, for example, question science? If someone says "science" supposedly says there is no God, don't many people accept it? Is that reasonable?

Comte and the spirit of the times in the 1800's in Europe laid the basis for scientism. In his presentation on the rise of scientism, however, Dr Principe goes on further to explain its development and scope of influence, which is very helpful and insightful. We will take that up now but first I would encourage you again to watch Dr Principe's presentation: <https://catholicscientists.org/video-themes/recommended/>. He does use some philosophical language but for the most part, his presentation will be fairly easy to follow.

Dr Principe notes that scientism most often comes out as a conflict with religion. But why would that be the case? He also points out, as we have done before, that that's never been the case historically and that there cannot be any real conflict between the truths of the physical sciences or physical world and Revelation because God is the author of both. The great St Augustine himself, as mentioned before, makes this very point. Dr Principe further demonstrates the complete absence of conflict between the two, historically, pointing out many scientists, including very notable ones, who were religious people, people of faith, non-atheists, one of which was St Albert the Great, the teacher of St Thomas Aquinas! There are, however, numerous others. Isaac Newton, who was one of the most influential physicists and mathematicians in history was one; Newton wasn't Catholic but he believed in the existence of God. Principe mentions that Robert Boyle, a famous chemist, was even called a lay bishop because he wrote as much on theology as he did chemistry; Boyle thought doing scientific research was a form of worship. Principe also gives a long list of priests who have been involved in the physical sciences. Perhaps the two most well known being Fr Gregor Mendel, the father of modern genetics and Fr Georges Lemaitre who proposed the so-called big bang theory. So where does this popular belief that "science" and religion are diametrically and irreconcilably come from? It was entirely contrived, manufactured by the materialists, by enemies of faith. How was this done and why? We will take that up the next time.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*