

The propagators of scientism have spread the notion that there is an irreconcilable conflict between “science” and religion; you must choose one or the other, you can’t believe in both, and of course it’s ridiculous to choose faith because that’s just silly superstition...so goes the claim. This blatantly false claim was entirely contrived, manufactured, and sold to man wholesale. Why, how, and by whom are the questions we now take up.

Principe traces the initial *promotion* of scientism, and especially the notion that there is some sort of conflict between true religion and true science, to a writing by John William Draper called: “History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science,” published in 1874 and still readily available today. It became a best-seller and was translated into several languages; it was widely read and well received.

But, a person might think, how much effect, much less lasting effect, could one book really have? Principe takes up that question by surveying his audience with this question: how many people have heard that, before Columbus, everyone believed the earth was flat? The audience was pretty much unanimous – everyone had heard that. You might remember hearing such a thing as well, maybe even in school. I did a little survey of my own and everyone I asked said: yeah, of course, I’ve heard that, they told us that in school. That belief is completely false, completely made up, and it was promoted in Draper’s book. Now maybe it is you can’t hardly believe it: everybody says so, it’s even taught in school, how could it possibly be false? Maybe Principe is mistaken or is just giving his own interpretation of history. As Principe points out, this falsehood (everybody thought the world was flat at the time of Columbus) has been debunked by virtually all contemporary, completely secular, historians. I strongly encourage you to do your own internet search so as to remove any doubt, and be completely convinced, that it’s just blatantly false that everyone thought Columbus would fall off the edge of the world. I did a search using: “Did Columbus prove the world is round.” Here’s one article I found verifying what Principe said: <https://www.history.com/articles/christopher-columbus-never-set-out-to-prove-the-earth-was-round>. You can choose your own wording for an internet search – see what you find.

To bring out just how absurd Draper’s claim was, even the ancient Romans – the Romans from our Lord’s time – knew that the earth was round, as evidenced by their coins which had a picture of the earth on them with the earth pictured as being round. Even the ancient philosophers – those who lived 4 to 6 hundred years before our Lord had deduced that the earth was round – a sphere. The ancient Greeks were not only astute philosophers but also mathematicians. Maybe you remember hearing about the “Pythagorean theorem” in school. That came from Pythagoras, a Greek mathematician who was born about 570 years *before* Christ. Pythagoras deduced that the earth is a sphere. As just one example of this being commonly held, Aristotle, who lived about 300 years before Christ, also held that the earth is a sphere (is round). As stated by one historian, no educated person at the time of Columbus thought the earth was flat!

Columbus did indeed run into arguments when he was preparing for, and soliciting funds for, his journey. But the arguments weren’t over whether the earth was flat or round but rather about the circumference of the earth. Columbus’ critics said he had grossly undercalculated the circumference of the earth and thus that he wouldn’t make it because he couldn’t carry enough supplies. It turns out his critics were right and Columbus wouldn’t have made it (survived the trip) if he hadn’t run into the Americas, which were then unknown to the Europeans.

Many historians point to Washington Irving, born in 1783 – who wrote fictional stories like Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow (the headless horseman) – as the one who propagated the fallacy that everyone believed the earth was flat at the time of Columbus. It is true that Irving wrote a *fictional* biography of Columbus, which *did* include the fiction that everyone believed the earth was flat, and it did precede Draper’s book. But it was Draper who picked this up and presented it as fact for the purpose of promoting scientism.

Let us come back to the main question we want to address: how did scientism get started and how did it become so widespread. A good part of the answer is this writing by Draper: “History of the Conflict Between and Science,” which was presented as true history but in fact had many blatantly false claims, like the one about Columbus, that have now become popular beliefs – myths or urban legends, if you will.

But what was the point or purpose of concocting such flagrant lies and presenting them as truth? The example of Columbus is a good one to answer that question. The whole Columbus story was presented as a conflict between religion and “science.” Columbus was presented as struggling against those backward theologians who were suppressing the truth and even any exploration of truths about the material world. Columbus, so goes the story, was right about the earth being round while religion and theologians were wrong. So, you see, religion is bad and theologians are bad people; they are trying to keep you in the dark ages, away from truth – so goes the “argument.” Religion is the enemy of man, “science” is for man, science is the great enlightenment, the only source of truth, the great liberator of man, and man’s only way towards progress. Generating this message, the message of scientism, was the purpose of Draper’s fabrications. Principe also points out that Draper’s book was distinctly anti-Catholic. He had a *personal* axe to grind – hence the lack of professionalism.

We have went to some lengths to show: 1) there can be no true conflict between the truths of nature and the truths of Revelation because God is the author of both, and 2) that historically there was no conflict between the two, that in fact it was always understood that true contradictions cannot exist and if there appears to be one, it’s just because one or the other is not yet understood rightly. SO: why manufacture the falsehood that there is a conflict and always has been, and then go to great efforts to sell it wholesale to the public at large?

To a large extent, that question has already been answered – it was to promote scientism – but the answer warrants a little more development. Today people are used to the idea of professional scientists – of scientific research being a full-time job from which one can earn living. However, as Principe points out, that was not always the case. The physical sciences, prior to the 1800’s, were often pursued not as a career but rather by those who had the time and private funding to do so. Furthermore, today science and scientists are considered god-like, great and practically infallible pillars of society. That too was not always the case. However, those pushing scientism in the 1800’s *wanted* that to be the case. Religion was considered the enemy of those who wanted scientism popularly embraced, simply because religion held that place of authority in the minds of most people. In short, it was a struggle for authority, for supremacy, in the minds of man. The enemy (religion or more precisely God) had to be dethroned in order for “science” and scientists to take that place.

This article wraps up the discussion on scientism. It has brought out several points, not just about scientism per se but also characteristics of the so-called enlightenment – including the mentalities of the time, goals of the so-called enlightenment thinkers, and methods used to sell their ideas. There are several features to take special note of. “Everybody says so,” or “everybody knows that,” or “everybody is doing it” – i.e., popular opinion – has powerful effects on what people choose to believe. Let us take special note, then, of how these popular beliefs are so often brought about. They are, first of all, often times brought about by just a handful of people with a personal agenda, and this was certainly true during the so-called enlightenment. Popular opinion has a certain power because of an underlying expectation that so many people could not be wrong. But how many people were involved in generating these beliefs – the belief in scientism for example? There was no great gathering of humanity with everyone pondering the question deeply and contributing to the answer. No, it is often the case that it is only a handful of people with a personal agenda. Dr Bernard Nathanson, a former abortionist and atheist who later became Catholic, relates that these same tactics were used to popularize abortion in U.S. Secondly, in regard to methods, notice the willingness to fabricate any kind of falsehood to win the popular mind. Dr Nathanson revealed that this was also a tactic used to promote and legalize abortion.

This discussion on scientism also makes clear that the enlightenment was distinctly materialistic. Remember that materialism does not just mean that I value material things too much – like the rich young man in the Gospels. That is a problem but it’s not what materialism refers to. Materialism is the belief that the only existence there is, is material existence; that there is no other existence, thus no God, angels, or human soul. It is thus intrinsically atheistic. Materialism is part of all the isms that will be presented in this series of articles, and, once again, these isms are now popular beliefs – much like scientism. Is it any wonder, then, that there is a great loss of faith today, that parishes are closing, that Mass attendance continues to decline, and that more and more people are thwarting their own happiness – both now and for all eternity? Are these underlying beliefs (the isms) not something we should address? *God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*