

We have now covered materialism, scientism, and the trifecta of pragmatism-utilitarianism-consequentialism. In this article we will take up a couple of more isms. However, with a topic like the isms, which is not “religious” *per se*, it can be easy to get lost, in particular to lose sight of the reason for talking about falsehoods, especially when we’d rather be talking about truths. It is helpful, then, to pull back from time to time and remind ourselves of the purpose, of why we’re talking about these things.

It might be helpful to say what we’re not doing. The purpose is not to give a history lesson. We are not just talking about some academic subject, something abstract, some sort of pie in the sky. We are also not just “philosophizing” – presenting this idea and that idea so that a person can pick and choose, like at a buffet, what they want to follow. When we talked about scientism we went a little into the “scientific method” and yet the purpose was not to teach statistics or science (it was rather to loosen the grip of scientism by bringing out that “science” is not infallible, it’s not as black & white as what people might often think). This is a list of what we’re not doing. So what *are* we doing?

Let us remember that the most pervasive spiritual combat of our times is for right belief. This is spiritual combat at the basement level, so to speak. There are higher levels of spiritual combat – fighting temptation would be the most common and simple example. However, a person cannot engage in that level of struggle unless they’ve first accepted true belief. In regard to basic beliefs, “the world” has gained the upper hand in the mind of modern man through the isms, and most people don’t even realize it. The isms put a person on the path to atheism without the person even realizing it; pragmatism especially brought out this point. A person not only will not but indeed cannot fight against an enemy that they don’t even see, that they don’t even know exists. It is the purpose of these articles to expose that enemy. The combat, then, will entail being able to recognize the expression and even dominance of these isms within ourselves and outside of ourselves (in the media, conversations, work, even the human dimension of the Church) and reject them. The purpose is to replace blindness with astute wisdom. Have the decency to lock this wisdom clearly in your mind so as to: 1) transmit it to the next generation, 2) defeat its dominance from society today, and 3) promote true worship of God.

Pragmatism, once again, is a good illustration of just how pervasive the isms are and their dominance of modern thinking. Even priests find themselves speaking in these terms at times, knowing that they can’t get anything across or have people respond unless there’s a “practical” reason for it. Even talking about the isms is an example. The isms are leading us to hell – the absolute most serious, indeed never-ending, consequence. Yawn, yeah, yeah – pass the chips. Unless we can give a “practical” reason for taking them seriously – meaning that they affect my life here and now in some way I don’t like – then I don’t care.

So again, remember the reason for talking about the isms: it is part of the struggle for right belief, a combat in which today the materialists have gained the upper hand. Our Lord, however, is all-powerful, and He alone is all-powerful, not the world, not the demons. If we engage the struggle, He will come to our aid.

We will soon be coming to the 2 big isms – relativism/subjectivism and humanism, and those will be the final ones we cover. Those 2 are full-blown atheism. However, the other isms lead up to them, which is part of the reason for covering them. So before coming to relativism and humanism, there are a few others we might touch on at least briefly starting with what’s called rationalism. The claim or belief of rationalism is that the human mind is supreme and thus something can be considered true only if the human mind can fully grasp it, fully comprehend it; human reason (not God or the teaching authority He gave to His Church) is the sole source and final test of what is true. Rationalism formed a big part of the so-called enlightenment, whose claim is to be the age of reason. We see two things immediately: 1) this is automatically a rejection of God’s revelation because no human mind can fully grasp the Trinity, and 2) the age-old scourge of pride. Rationalism is obviously man rearing his prideful head (which is always anti-Christ) and saying: I will be the god. Pride is actually central to all of the isms. They echo the first temptation: you will be like gods unto yourself. This is a big contributor to atheistic humanism. We have to get over our fear of prideful people; knowing the truth in the depths of our being is a big step in the right direction.

Catholic Answers has an article on rationalism: <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/Rationalism>. It is a bit academic but overall, still fairly readable, in case you would like to read a little more on this topic. This article will draw some on their presentation.

The common accusation thrown at the faith by the so-called enlightenment (materialists) is that faith is some sort of blind, unthinking, and thus unreasonable belief, and now we are going to cast that aside and actually use human reason. Anybody who spouts such a claim is either an outright liar or has never bothered to study the faith, especially the great teachers like Augustine or Aquinas; Aquinas especially used very rigorous reasoning to expound the truths revealed by God. You have probably heard the word “transubstantiation;” this was Aquinas’ rigorous use of human reason to understand what happens at the time of consecration. The claims of faith being “unreasonable,” then, are like ignorant children mocking that which they do not know. Is this what you want to be a part of? Is this what you want to be like? How about actually studying the faith instead of letting “my desires” and “my opinion” be the supreme ruler. If this is not something a person wants to do, then at least have the decency to sling mud from the outside rather than from the inside. The faith is reasonable, it is reasonable to believe – and in fact it’s unreasonable not to. However, the faith – what God has revealed – provides knowledge (truth, reality) that is beyond human reason, that human reason cannot arrive at without God telling us. The reason for spending time on this is because the isms are subtle and clever and so we have to be careful – a repudiation of rationalism is *not* a rejection of human reason. God created the human intellect and He expects us to use it. The primary purpose of that intellect is to know Him so that with our God-given free-will, we can love choose to love Him. Anti-rationalism is NOT anti-human reason; it *is* anti-pride.

Coming back now to rationalism per se... One of the things that rationalism brings out is the convoluted mess that happens once a person steps away from the truths revealed by God. The isms started fighting amongst themselves. In some ways, rationalism opposed things like Comte’s positivism or it’s almost identical partner – empiricism. The truth, however, is that they are not that far apart. Both terminate at, if not also start at, the same point, namely materialism, a rejection of God (atheism), an exaltation of man over God; there is an strong element of rationalism in Comte’s positivism and/or empiricism as well. Part of the reason for bringing this out is because the isms can be (and often are) presented in such a way as to say: well, here are the only choices – either choose (for example) rationalism or positivism/empiricism – of course faith, belief in Revelation, is just not an option. It’s good to be aware of that; the conflicts between the isms can actually be used to pull a person in, precisely because the isms are presented as the only choices a person can embrace. Let the dogs fight among themselves – stay with the truth and teach this to your children and grandchildren.

The Catholic Answers article brings out how rationalism was eventually applied to Revelation. We should bear in mind that rationalism is something that underscored pretty much all of the so-called enlightenment – it was all the buzz, it was in the air, it was the spirit of the times. German Protestantism then picked up this “spirit of the times” and decided to apply it to what God has revealed. This is a prime example of how (possibly) good intentions are never enough, they must be accompanied by real virtue and be especially buried in the virtue of humility. The attempt to use rationalism to explain the faith was doomed to failure, doomed to lead to atheism. To underscore this point, here is a quote from Pope Leo XIII who was Pope during the late 1800’s:

“No poison is more fatal to divine faith than the subtle and insidious spread of rationalism.”

Notice the word subtle. Pope Leo XIII says as well, the isms are subtle. The popes did their job in trying to pull man back from the brink of disaster but just like in the time of Christ, few were willing to listen.

What were some of the effects of applying rationalism to Scripture, to Divine Revelation? If you have spent any time trying to read about or study the faith, you might have run into the attacks on Scripture and the person of Jesus that arose especially during the 1800’s. These were the (perhaps initially unintended) products of rationalism. Since the miracles are not “natural,” since they are beyond human power and thus the human mind, one thing that rationalism ended up doing was throwing out, simply denying, the miracles performed by our Lord – things that St John (in his Gospel) called signs, signs of His Divinity. Beware of rationalistic tendencies, they are still quite present in the world today. These attacks on Scripture and the person of our Lord remain amongst the most common attacks on the faith to this day.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.