

1. Materialism

Formal materialism claims that material reality is the only reality there is. There is no such thing as spirit, spiritual reality does not exist; thus, there is no God, angels, or human soul. Materialism is necessarily atheistic. Insistence that material reality is the only reality, however, creates other problems as well. What about things like truth, love, goodness? These are immaterial realities. And yet, many of the materialistic isms will make some claim about truth. How can you claim something about truth (an immaterial reality) while holding that immaterial reality does not exist? This whole system of falsehoods is self-contradictory, which is characteristic of falsehoods in general. The faith, in contrast, forms a single, consistent (non-contradictory), unified whole.

All of the other isms presented hold to materialism. Materialism, we might say, is the trunk of the tree. Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish “the isms” and this is part of the reason – they are all branches of the same tree. This also means that as a person yields more and more to one (or more) of the isms, they come closer and closer to outright atheism. There are many young people today, from families that go to Mass every Sunday, who are wondering if God even exists. It’s, in part, because they’re surrounded by materialism.

Sometimes people speak of “being too materialistic.” What the person usually means is that they put too much value and emphasis on material things and not enough on God; material things are allowed to be more important than God. That is a good insight, it can often be true. A person who acknowledges this problem about themselves has done well to do so. While being too materialistic can separate a person from God and can put them on the path to full-blown materialism, at the same time they are 2 different things. Practical Materialism is a term from Pope St John Paul II who repeatedly warned against this growing mentality. He said that many people do not ascribe to materialism per se but they live as if that is case – they live first and foremost for this life and this world, not for God; they give little if any thought to eternal life.

2. Scientism

Scientism is not science; it is not a scientific statement. Scientism claims that the physical sciences alone provide answers of any relevance to man, answers about the totality of all that is real, which is materialistic.

Comte’s positivism basically laid down scientism, but it was especially John William Draper’s 1874 book called “History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science” that promoted it. Draper tries to portray the Church as always being against “science,” trying to oppress people and the truths of the natural world (science), and that there is an intrinsic opposition between “science” and religion – you can’t hold to both. In addition to being an outrageously false claim (there can be no conflict between the 2 because God is the author of both), his book also contains other blatant factual falsehoods like: everyone believed the earth was flat at the time of Columbus and the Church wanted to maintain this falsehood so they tried to oppress Columbus. No one believed the earth was flat at the time of Columbus. Even the ancient Greeks realized the earth was round as early as 600-400 BC. Priests have studied the physical sciences without being reprimanded by the Church, including *Saint* Albert the Great, Doctor of the Church and Fr Gregor Mendel who is considered the father of modern genetics. How does that reconcile with the claim that that bad Church is trying to keep you down by suppressing “science?” It doesn’t. The Church has always understood that the created world presents a sort of “natural Revelation.” Our Lord Himself used natural things as analogies for spiritual realities. As Dr Principe points out, the goal of scientism is to replace Christ as King with scientists/science as king.

Become aware of subtle promotions of scientism like: “Trust the science.” What’s that mean? It sounds like it’s saying: “science” is the supreme, and perhaps infallible, source of information on anything relevant. Remember also that “science” is not infallible, not by any means. The notion that the physical sciences are black & white, that they always provide clear, definitive answers is simply false. As one contemporary scientist said: Science yes, scientism no.

3. Pragmatism

Most all of these isms make some claim about truth – what is true, how is truth determined. Of course, God is not an allowable answer! The same is true for pragmatism. Pragmatism says that something is right and good

and true if “it works,” if it is “practical.” Practical consequences, which means the consequences in this life and this world, determine *entirely* what is right and good and true. Is it ok to live together outside of marriage? Well, says pragmatism, there’s no way to know (God has no say) unless you try it out and see what the consequences are. If it tickles man’s fancy in the here and now, then it’s right and good and true. What is “practical” is the *sole* determiner of what’s right and good and true.

Pragmatism might make some claim about tolerating religion but it’s a false claim because the only “religion” that pragmatism will allow for is one that suits man in the here and now – it provides him with some sort of comfort, then ok. This is the exact opposite of the true religion revealed by our Lord: sacrifice of self is central.

Pragmatism is a big one in the U.S. Begin to notice how often it takes precedence. Political campaigns and economic practices are good examples. But it often takes precedence even in the human dimension of the Church. Very few people will accept good theological reasons for doing something or for enhancing true worship of God; if there’s not a “practical” reason, if it doesn’t make something quicker or easier or more pleasing in some way, forget it. Conversely, if there’s a “practical” reason for doing something that actually detracts from the life of the Church or sincere worship of God, well then of course do it. Why wouldn’t you?

4. Utilitarianism

Notice that pragmatism does not provide a criterion for deciding whether or not “it works.” For example, pragmatism’s statement to a car maker would be that their business practices should be based on practical consequences – not necessarily ethics or service or the good of employees. The main question, though, is: what consequences? Profit? Customer satisfaction? Reliability? Pragmatism per se leaves the question unanswered. Car manufacturing would be just one simple example. Pragmatism is meant to apply to every walk of life, even to everyday things. So what criterion should be used to decide whether or not “it works” – which practical consequences should be considered? Of course it’s not eternal life (the pragmatist only considers effects or consequences for this life and this world), but then what is it?

In effect, utilitarianism – as spelled out by the Englishman Jeremy Bentham – provides an answer and the answer is that the criterion is whatever maximizes “happiness” in the here and now. Happiness here does not mean eternal life, it means whatever maximizes my immediate pleasure/comfort/satisfaction of personal desires. Notice that this directly contradicts the teachings of our Lord, a teaching He made in numerous ways, at numerous times – consider just the Beatitudes which say (basically) blessed are those who suffer now for my sake (who love Me now) for they will have never-ending, ecstatic happiness in Heaven. Utilitarianism is, in some ways, the epitome of anti-love, anti-christ, the glorification of the disorder of original sin, and thus the destruction of man. While man is born with this inclination due to original sin not since the time of Christ (or even before) had man ever considered it something right and good and true. This is a modern development.

Utilitarianism was proposed by Bentham about a century before Charles Peirce proposed pragmatism. Nonetheless, they go together like a hand and glove. What’s called consequentialism is just pragmatism applied to “ethics.” Some might consider Bentham’s emphasis on personal pleasure too extreme by not considering the effect on others. Consequentialism is pragmatism for “ethics” – but with man as the supreme decider.

5. 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.

Next week’s article will finish up the summary of the isms.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.