

THE MIND OF THE UNBELIEVER – AN ARTICLE IN 3 PARTS

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SECULARISM AND RATIONALISM – PART 1

PLURALISM AND RELATIVISM – PART 2

EXISTENTIALISM, MATERIALISM AND PRAGMATISM – PART 3

THE MIND OF THE UNBELIEVER – PART 1 Secularism and Rationalism

Many philosophies or ways of thinking are found in our culture. Some of these ways of thinking have been described with one word “post-modernism.” Portions of these philosophies are directly opposed to Christianity. For example, **secularism** adopts the culture’s way of thinking. A benign example of secularism might be “Shop until you drop,” but a destructive aspect of secularism is evident when God’s ways are denied based upon popular cultural thinking, such as “If it isn’t illegal, it’s okay.” We Christians know that many legal activities are, in fact, unethical. We can legally cheat and destroy each other. Divorces are legal but biblically forbidden.



Each of us is impacted by these philosophies. Not every aspect of these philosophies is unchristian, however. For example, existentialism highlights the uniqueness and value of the individual. The Bible teaches that God created us in His own image. Another example is Pragmatism. We might easily become unethical by following “the ends justify the means.” On the other hand, Pragmatism also highlights the importance of accomplishing an important purpose in a practical way.

While we recognize these philosophies possess strengths, let’s look at the weaknesses that create problems for the work of evangelism.

While we know the power of reason and the need for logic, **rationalism** fights with faith. The Christian witness needs to know that all philosophies are based on certain assumptions that could rightfully be called faith statements. Usually the rationalist

objects to faith, saying that it is unreasonable. The assumption, however, is that all truth can be known through reason. That is a faith statement! So the position of the rationalist is contradictory.



The personal witness can respond to the rationalist by saying: “All reason must be based on faith. You have faith that truth can be discovered through reason. I agree with you and would add that truth can also be discovered through God the Revealer of Truth and Reason.” This response or tactic from the Christian levels the playing field. By finding common ground, the Christian can then deal with issues of faith. The Christian then expresses her faith in Jesus Christ as revealing to us what God is like.

THE MIND OF THE UNBELIEVER – PART 2

Pluralism and Relativism

Continuing our series on the Mind of the Unbeliever, here are two more philosophies that are prevalent in today’s Western post-modern society.

One common way of thinking found today is **pluralism**, which acknowledges the diversity among us. A democracy thrives on diversity. The truth is we are each unique individuals.



Unfortunately, another form of pluralism becomes a hindrance to the witnessing Christian. Let’s label this form of pluralism “dogmatic” pluralism. This form of pluralism sees diversity as the ultimate truth. For the Christian witness to encourage another person to change is seen by the dogmatic pluralist as a violation of personal identity, “How dare you ask me to change! Who are you?” This same form of pluralism says there are many ways to God, and adherents expect everyone to validate all means to God as equally valid. The dogmatic pluralist resists elevating one method over another; all are to be considered of equal value. When the Christian begins dialogue with a person holding this philosophy, the point of conflict becomes “Jesus is the only way of salvation.”

The Christian witness, to be effective, will hold his position that Jesus is the only way while acknowledging that the other person is free to hold another position. If the pluralist is true to his philosophy, he will allow you to hold your opinion, although the

Christian witness may have to remind him of it. The Christian will explain that his position comes from what Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). For the Christian to be a faithful follower of Jesus, he must believe as Jesus did. Jesus said that He spoke only what God told Him to say (John 17:8). Therefore our opinion is not set against the pluralists’ point of view, but we are embracing what Jesus said the Father told Him to say.

This puts the pluralist in opposition to Jesus and God. Here is where the Holy Spirit must teach truth.

The **relativist** believes, “Everything is relative,” except that one statement which is absolute. Relativists’ philosophy essentially crumbles on their own basic assumption. Contemporary relativists, however, do not feel the need to submit to the law of non-contradiction. The law of non-contradiction teaches that two opposing statements cannot both be true. Either one statement is accurate and the other false. Or they are both false. Just as the pluralists resist Christians saying there is only way to God, so the relativists resist by saying our point of view is “too narrow and judgmental.”



Relativists like the pluralists, however, are required by their own philosophy to allow you to hold whatever opinion you have. So relativists may hate your position, but must accept your ideas on the basis of their own philosophy. Therefore, the Christian, with kindness, gentleness, and perseverance must keep teaching the Gospel. Once more we believe the Holy Spirit will change the heart and mind of the relativist.

THE MIND OF THE UNBELIEVER – PART 3

Existentialism, Materialism, and Pragmatism

This is the concluding article in our series on the Mind of the Unbeliever. Listed below are the last three philosophies prevalent in today’s Western post-modern society.



Existentialism can be described by three components: every person is unique; we are to live for the moment; and truth is known by inner, subjective experience. The Christian witness will find agreement and disagreement in each of these concepts. Christians do believe that each person is unique, but will resist falling into individualism that sees the individual serving as a god. The Christian also sees each person as highly valued and

unique, but remains convinced that God deals with all persons. The Christian will see a person's individuality coexisting with God's plan for all humankind. The Christian witness will agree that truth can be found by inner subjective experience because the Holy Spirit works within every individual. Truth can be known subjectively and objectively. God deals with us in ways that are "outside one's self." For example, a person may say, "I don't believe in gravity," but that does not change the objective truth that when he jumps from a building the forces of gravity will smash his belief.

The Christian witness will acknowledge that the existentialist has truth to teach us; however, the weaknesses of existentialism are problematic for the Christian witness. The existentialist may not take into account heaven and the eternal judgment because he lives simply for the moment. The existentialist will resist attempts of evangelism because he is unique and not subject to someone else's opinion. The existentialist will resist the Christian's appeal to the Bible because the existentialist does not affirm biblical truths unless the existentialist feels the Bible agrees with him.

Materialism focuses on matter or the acquisition of things. Materialism competes with spirituality; that which is seen or held is valued above that which is invisible. The Christian witness who speaks of the spirit world suggests an alternative world view. The Christian can ask leading questions such as, "After you have acquired these things, what next?" or ask, "What is your belief about life after death? Do you believe that humans are matter only or are they spirits as well?" Perhaps we can give a personal testimony such as, "I appreciate material things and pleasure, but have found that they leave me empty or wanting more. Is that your experience, too?"



Pragmatism believes that whatever is right should be done; whatever brings about good results should be sought. This philosophy all too quickly may embrace the end goal while giving little attention to the means, the ways of getting to an objective. Another concern of pragmatism lies in our inability to predict the future. What may appear to be a right goal now may actually mislead us. What brought about a good result in one circumstance may not apply to another situation. While the Christian should be pragmatic, we must realize the limitations of pragmatism. God has given us certain ideals and ethical principles by which we should live. We ought to apply these moral principles to the means and ends we seek.

