

# DISOrientation

THE 13 "ISMS" THAT WILL SEND YOU  
TO INTELLECTUAL "LA-LA LAND"

How to  
Go to College  
without Losing  
your Mind.



Edited by  
John Zmirak

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Study Guide

ASCENSION  
ADDRESS

West Chester, Pennsylvania

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## Leader's Notes

### *Introduction*

This study guide is designed to help college students “go deeper” in their understanding of the various ideologies presented in *Disorientation*. Undoubtedly, each essay can elicit questions that are ideal for small group discussion or personal study.

### *Study Group Leader's Guidelines*

We suggest one of two approaches to conducting a *Disorientation* study group: 1) After the book has been read in its entirety by all study participants; or 2) As the book is being read by group members, one or two essays at a time, with study sessions being held after each essay (or two) has been read. This second option has one obvious advantage: the essay(s) to be studied will be fresh in students' minds. (If the first option is chosen, leaders will need to encourage study participants to review the particular essay(s) the week before they will be discussed.)

Each group members will need to bring his or her copy of *Disorientation* to each study session. In addition, it will be helpful to have at least one copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997 edition) on hand to address any specific questions about Catholic beliefs that may arise.

You will notice that each essay has three study questions. Each question has multiple components, or “subsidiary” questions, all grouped around a given theme or point. For example, under “Freshman Errors,” question one on Sentimentalism is:

*1. Is this term familiar to you? Have you ever heard it used before to criticize someone's political or religious views? In what other contexts have you heard the word “sentimental” used in a negative sense? Can you think of a movie or TV show that made you groan because it so obviously tried to manipulate your feelings? Name one or two. What elements made them seem corny?*

It is recommended that each component be discussed separately. So, in this example, you would start your discussion with the first component question “Is this term familiar to you?” and have the group as a whole respond. Then move on and discuss the second component question, “Have you ever heard it used before to criticize someone's political or religious views?” And so on.

### *Length of Study Group Program*

We recommend that you meet for four to six weeks, allowing for discussion of the study questions for three essays per weekly session. The length can be varied depending on the number of essays you choose to discuss in a given session.

### *How to Conduct a Study Session*

It is recommended that each member of your study group read in advance the questions from the *Disorientation Study Guide* to be discussed at a particular session. You should make sure that you have a sufficient number of copies of the Study Guide on hand. In addition, encourage group members to review the essays to be discussed so that the points each essay raises are fresh in participant's minds.

Discussion sessions should typically last sixty to ninety minutes. Your time could be allocated in the following way:

#### Sixty-minute session

- |                                |            |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and opening prayer | 5 minutes  |
| • Discussion questions         | 50 minutes |
| • Closing prayer and petitions | 5 minutes  |

#### Ninety-minute session

- |                                |            |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and opening prayer | 5 minutes  |
| • Discussion questions         | 35 minutes |
| • Break                        | 10 minutes |
| • Discussion questions         | 35 minutes |
| • Closing prayer and petitions | 5 minutes  |

It is important for each session to start and end on time so that members can rely on this consistency. College students, like everyone else, have many demands on their time, and it will hurt attendance and participation if the schedule—particularly the ending time—varies more than a few minutes.

The study group leader should be thoroughly familiar with *Disorientation* and the content of this Study Guide. While a completed degree in philosophy and/or theology isn't necessary, it would be helpful if the group leader is well-versed in the various intellectual currents prevalent on college campuses and has some familiarity with philosophical and theological terms and concepts. A leader with such a background can help keep your study sessions on track and make your discussions more fruitful.

# Introduction

1. What does the editor mean by “ideologies”? This word, invented by Karl Marx, describes world views that are “self-interested,” which distort a truthful vision of the world to promote a private or political agenda. In what sense does each of the fourteen worldviews listed in this book serve such an agenda?
2. The editor also refers to these world views as “heresies.” The word “heresy” comes from the Greek *hairetikos*, “able to choose.” Those who follow such “heresies” have *chosen* “a tiny piece of the truth, surgically removed from the rest of reality” and grown it “in a test tube into a giant thumb, or ear, or tongue.” Does this suggest that heresies are not all outright lies or intentional distortions, but rather partial, distorted views of reality?
3. As you go through each of the fourteen intellectual movements analyzed in this book, consider whether “ideology” or “heresy” is more appropriate for each one—or whether another word better describes it.

# Sentimentalism



*"In the absence of faith, we govern by tenderness,  
and tenderness leads to the gas chamber."*

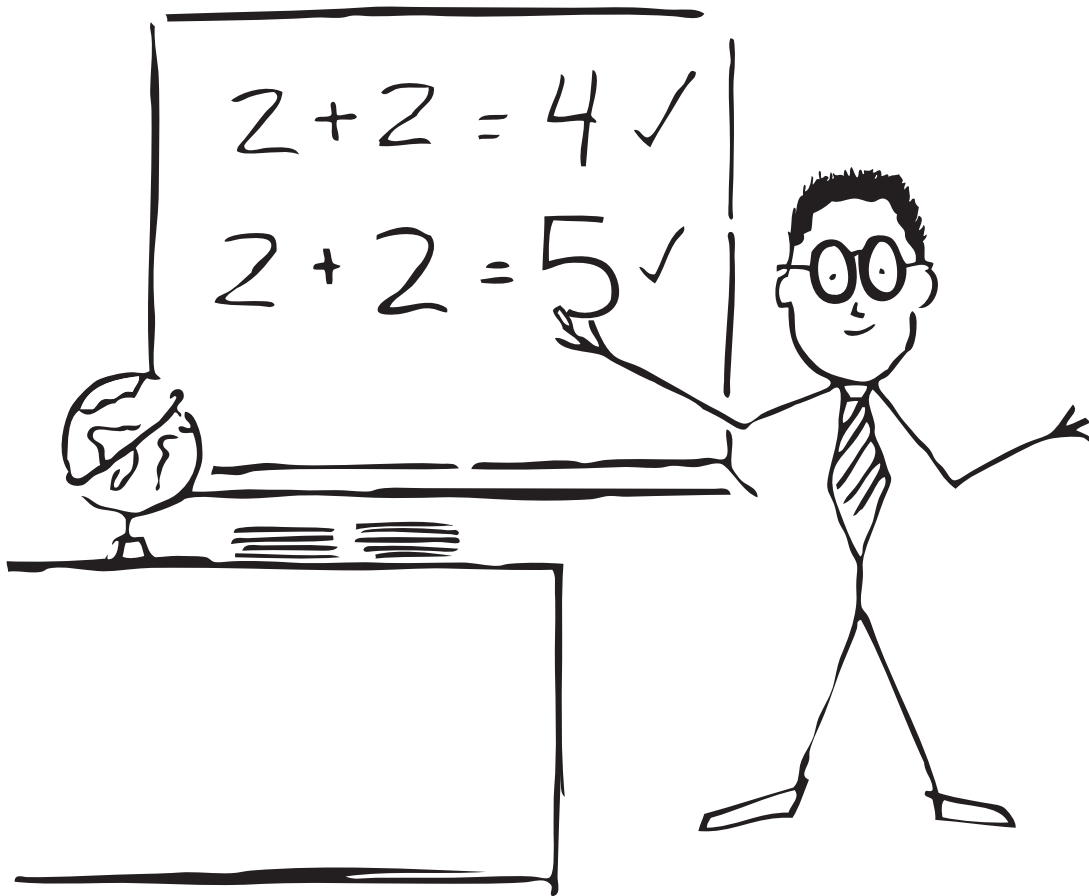
– Flannery O'Connor, novelist and short story writer

## *Freshman Errors*

# *Sentimentalism*

1. Is this term familiar to you? Have you ever heard it used before to criticize someone's political or religious views? In what other contexts have you heard the word "sentimental" used in a negative sense? Can you think of a movie or TV show that made you groan because it so obviously tried to manipulate your feelings? Name one or two. What elements made them seem corny?
2. How could someone use the same kind of manipulation as the makers of one of those cloying movies to convince you on something important—say, a religious or moral issue? Has someone ever used this tactic on you when trying to persuade you to change your mind about an unpopular teaching of the Church? How did it make you feel? How did it affect your thinking?
3. The author writes that the "sentimentalist trusts his feelings over hallowed authority or the urgings of his reason." Why is this a dangerous thing? Can you think of some examples in history where the entire population of a country followed this practice—with destructive results? Are there any issues on which Americans do this today?

# Relativism



*"We are moving toward a dictatorship of Relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."*

– Pope Benedict XVI

# RELATIVISM

1. When Metaxas talks about “Celery Green Day” as the holiday for relativists, what does he mean? Why would such a fuzzy, indeterminate holiday be more appealing to young adults than one with a definite date, one that makes specific demands of people (for instance, a religious holiday such as Good Friday or Ash Wednesday)? What would be lost if we replaced definitive, historical holidays with made-up, feel-good holidays like Celery Green Day? What is lost when we replace solid, consistent beliefs with vague, relativistic ones?
2. The author says that relativists reject any single, enduring definition of truth. Have you encountered this position in any of your classes? How did people defend it? How did you respond?
3. Metaxas asserts that people become relativists out of a fear of “authoritarianism” and “fundamentalism”—attitudes that dismiss reason and diminish the mercy of God. He proposes that truth is paradoxical, a balance between the two extremes of relativism and fundamentalism. Here are the examples he gives: “Love is a verb *and* a noun. Light is particles *and* waves. Jesus was fully God *and* fully man. And since the Bible was written by people *inspired by the Holy Spirit*, it was written by God *and* by men.” Does the notion that truth is paradoxical seem persuasive, or simply puzzling?

# Hedonism



*"Oh, how desperately bored, in spite of their grim determination to have a Good Time, the majority of pleasure-seekers really are!"*

– Aldous Huxley, author, *Brave New World*

# HEDONISM

1. The author says that Hedonism is more than just a description of people who “party hearty,” but is in fact a consistent worldview all its own—with serious philosophers behind it, and a major impact on American culture. In fact, he lays out several different historical world-views and their attitude toward pleasure and suffering. Being perfectly honest with yourself, which one do you find most appealing? The hedonist? The Gnostic? The Stoic? Or the Christian? What makes it hard to cling to the Christian view of suffering today?
2. How can Zmirak at once say that suffering is objectively evil, and also that Christians should learn to sometimes welcome, even embrace it? Is this a contradiction? How does he try to resolve it? Do you find his explanation convincing?
3. Have you ever tried to “unite” your own sufferings, in your mind and heart, with Christ’s? If so, what effect did it seem to have on your ability to handle difficult times? If not, what do you think would happen if you tried?

# Progressivism



*"[C]hange is a development which abandons nothing en route,  
which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or  
the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen."  
– T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"*

# **PROGRESSIVISM**

1. Peter Kreeft describes progressivists as people who are snobbish toward the past, who blindly accept newer ideas as truer than old ones—just as new computers and cars are more high-tech than older models. Do you think the progress of technology has fooled us into believing that all things—even philosophy and theology—move forward from worse to better? Do you see evidence of this attitude in any of your college classes? Do any of your friends think this way?
2. The author makes a big point of explaining the difference between feeling optimistic about world events and practicing the virtue of hope for eternal salvation. Why is this distinction so important? Have you ever felt embarrassed because the Church’s teachings seem so “out of sync” with modern life? Do Kreeft’s arguments help you resolve this tension?
3. Kreeft says that many people adopt Progressivism because they fear that clinging to firm religious truths could lead to intolerance, even violence. Given the reality of terrorism and fundamentalism today, how can we answer this concern? Have anti-religious movements also practiced intolerance and violence? Does that suggest that it isn’t religion, or tradition, which causes these problems—but rather something about human nature (for instance, original sin)?

# Multi-Culturalism



*"Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read him."*

– Saul Bellow, novelist

# MULTICULTURALISM

1. The writer says that Multiculturalism isn't really about celebrating "diversity," but instead is an ideology that hates Christianity and the West. He points out that multiculturalists apply double standards in judging Western versus non-Western, Christian versus non-Christian religions. Have you encountered this in any of your courses? Would you hesitate to challenge this in class, afraid that you might be accused of bigotry, even racism?
2. As Spencer points out, there are key differences among the values treasured by people from different cultures. Are there any universal values that everyone (at least in our country) must respect, regardless of the beliefs held by one's ancestors? Name a few.
3. Is it arrogant and wrong for us to hold that our own religion is truer than another's? Is it offensive to say that the values, laws, and customs we have inherited are superior to those of other religions and cultures? If we don't believe that they are superior, then how do we justify practicing them? Does Christian charity demand that we accommodate ourselves to the beliefs of others?

# Anti-Catholicism

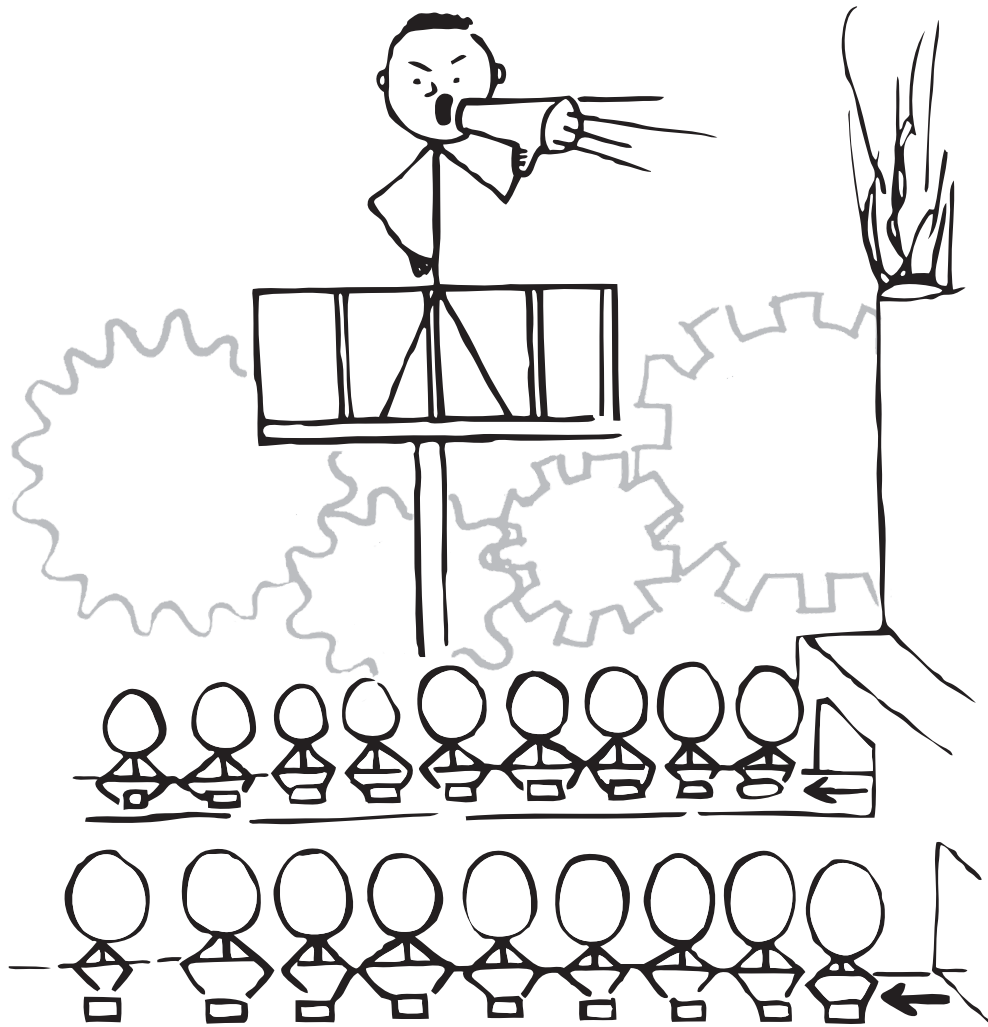


*"[Anti-Catholicism] is the deepest-held bias in the history of the American people."*  
– Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., historian

# Anti-Catholicism

1. Has anyone tried to recruit you to attend Christian functions where anti-Catholic attitudes are taken for granted? If so, what was this experience like? Did you feel ready to answer the criticisms people made of Catholic teachings and practices? If not, did you begin to doubt the faith you grew up with?
2. Which statements in the Bible do you find most confusing or troubling? Have you ever asked a priest or Catholic professor about them? Have you ever looked up the relevant issues in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—which is heavily based on the Bible?
3. Are you in the habit of reading the Bible? Have you read reliable books to help you understand the Bible, such as the Catholic study guides listed at the end of this essay? Do you think it would help you to answer anti-Catholic arguments if you knew the Bible better? If you feel resistant to reading the Bible, why do you think that is?

# Utilitarianism



*"Just as G.K. Chesterton ... once argued "pragmatism doesn't work," it might be said that utilitarianism doesn't have utility. How does a society maintain moral order in the face of a standard relying on expediency?"*

– Herbert London, college dean, professor,  
president of the Hudson Institute

## *Junior Delusions*

# UTILITARIANISM

1. Fr. Longenecker compares the utilitarian worldview to the instinctive response of animals, which lack the faculty of reason and simply follow their inborn drives—to eat, to fight, to kill, and to mate. How does following such an ideology dehumanize us and others? Come up with some examples in your own daily life where this could happen.
2. The author argues that Utilitarianism is incompatible with freedom, since utilitarians want to make the largest number of people happy—if need be, against their will. Which do you think is more important, freedom or happiness? Are you “happy” with the utilitarian definition of happiness? If not, what do you think is missing from it?
3. Fr. Longenecker says that Utilitarianism is not, in the long run, really useful—and that the pursuit of happiness (as utilitarians define it) does not make people really happy. Looking at the examples he gives, do you agree with him? What world-view is really “useful”? What kind of activities really do make people happy?

# Consumerism



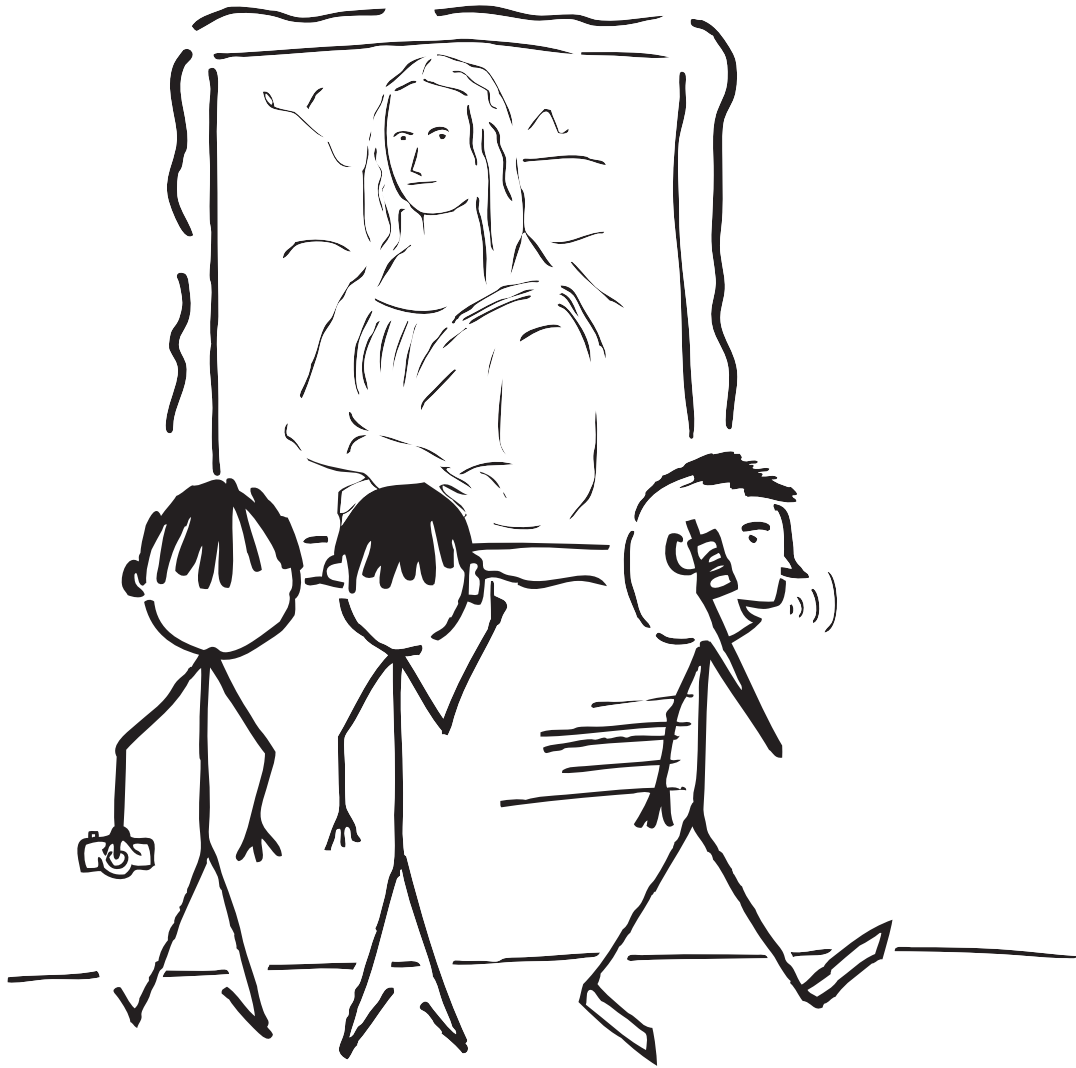
*"True happiness flows from the possession of wisdom and virtue and not from the possession of external goods."*

– Aristotle

# CONSUMERISM

1. Had you ever heard this term before? Did it ever occur to you that there might be a consistent worldview behind the accumulation of stuff? Does the author's catalogue of how materialistic we have become compared to our ancestors make you uncomfortable? What might you consider doing about it in your own life?
2. When Brende describes the accumulation of wealth, gadgets, and luxurious experiences as addictive, do you agree? Are there any material objects you feel "addicted" to, and can't really imagine living without? What would really happen if you tried?
3. Has money, or power, or prestige, played too large a part in such decisions you've made up till now? If you agree with Brende's analysis, how might that change the kind of courses you take, and the sort of career you are considering? Does that prospect make it tempting to dismiss his arguments out of hand?

# Cynicism



*"The cynic knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing."*  
– Oscar Wilde, deathbed convert

# CYNICISM

1. Fr. Rutler explains that ancient Cynics rejected popular opinion and the teachings of authorities, in favor of searching more rigorously for Truth. Modern cynics, on the other hand, simply dismiss the search for Truth as a waste of time—and concentrate on enjoying themselves. Have you seen evidence of this among some of your classmates, or even your professors? Give some examples.
2. The author asserts that Catholic colleges shrugging off their religious identity—as so many did in the 1960s and 1970s—was not an assertion of intellectual freedom, but a lazy, cynical surrender to the secular culture. Do you agree? Have you ever found it hard work clinging to your faith when professors or classmates treat it dismissively—like a childish or peasant superstition?
3. How would you argue with someone whose attitude toward what you hold sacred is sarcastic and cynical? Is it tempting to not even argue, for fear of being laughed at? When it is important to stick to your guns, might it make sense to turn the tables, and find ways to show the cynics up as adolescent, lazy, even ridiculous?

# Feminism



*"Feminism is doomed to failure because it is based on an attempt to repeal and restructure human nature."*

– Phyllis Schlafly, mother, pro-life leader, chairman of Eagle Forum

# FEMINISM

1. Mrs. Steichen lays out several tenets of Feminism early on in her essay, and she suggests that you test yourself on how many you may believe in. How did you score on this test? How much of a feminist are you?
2. Given its role in legalizing abortion, some have claimed that Feminism an ideology much like Communism or Fascism that can be discredited by its historical body count. Do you agree with this assessment? Since feminists insist on equalizing opportunities for women, even at the expense of their children, is “pro-life Feminism” simply a misleading, hopeless project?
3. The author argues that Feminism pits women against their husbands and their children, importing Marxist class warfare into the intimate realm of the family. What alternative ways of obtaining fair treatment for women does she point to? Do you find them persuasive?

# Scientism



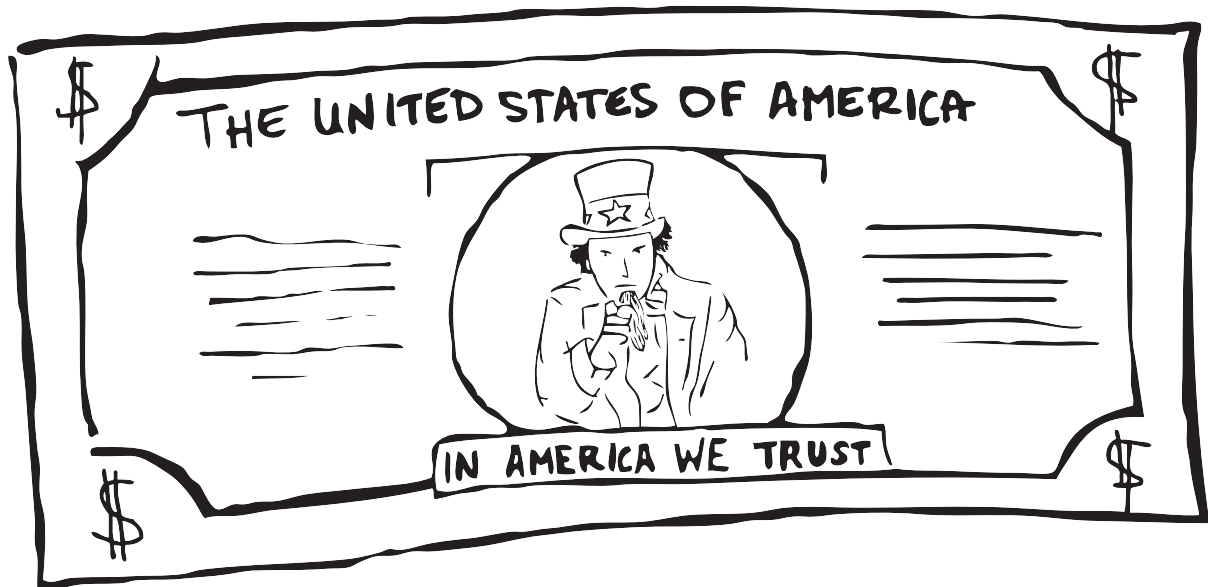
*"Insofar as he makes use of his healthy senses, man himself is the best and most exact scientific instrument possible. The greatest misfortune of modern physics is that its experiments have been set apart from man, as it were; physics refuses to recognize nature in anything not shown by artificial instruments, and even uses this as a measure of its accomplishments."*

– Goethe, poet, scientist, author, Faust

# SCIENTISM

1. Is this the first time you have encountered the idea that science can be made into an ideology? According to Dr. Keck, what is the difference between pursuing *science* and promoting *scientism*? Where do we draw the line at granting research science the final word on issues of life and death?
2. Does learning that philosophy and theology were traditionally considered sciences change your view of science? Can you accept a picture of science that includes them? If not, why not? Does math-based, experimental science seem more reliable than the teachings of the Church or the arguments of philosophers?
3. Keck points out that believers in Scientism aren't consistent; on the one hand, they claim that human beings are the accidental products of evolution, with no immortal souls or special dignity in the universe. On the other, they often speak out strongly for human rights. Can you reconcile these two positions? If not, which one would you rather sacrifice, and why?

# Americanism



*"America is a nation with the soul of a church."*

– G. K. Chesterton, novelist, Catholic convert and apologist

# AMERICANISM

1. Does this essay strike you as anti-American or unpatriotic? What do you make of Shea's distinction between patriotism and nationalism—which hinges on the role of sinful pride? Do you think that love of nation is like love of family? If so, must it be uncritical?
2. Chesterton wrote that America is “a nation with the soul of a church.” According to Shea, what does this mean? Can America be considered special and “chosen” as the Jews were chosen? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Can our loyalty to our country ever conflict with our loyalty to the Church? Which would we choose? How hard would that choice be to make? What can we learn from Pope Leo XIII on the right extent and limits of patriotism?

# Marxism



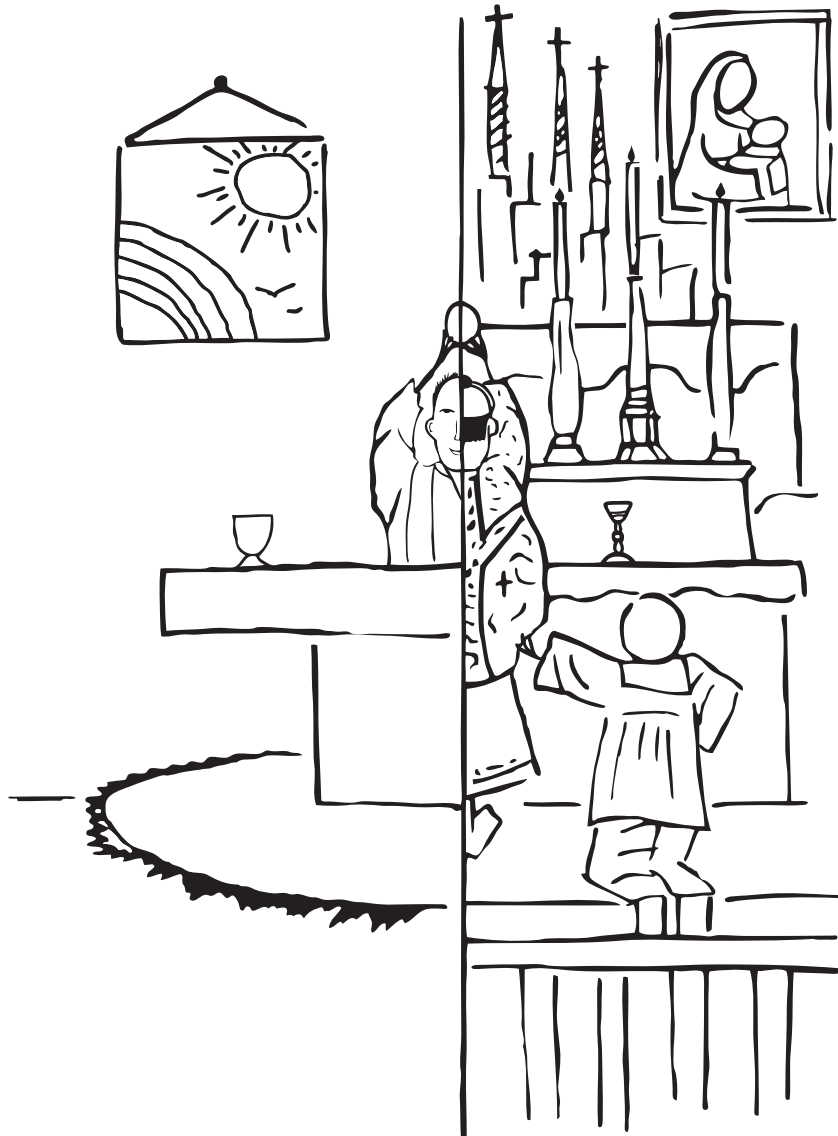
*"[A]lthough the socialists, stealing the very Gospel itself with a view to deceive more easily the unwary, have been accustomed to distort it so as to suit their own purposes, nevertheless so great is the difference between their depraved teachings and the most pure doctrine of Christ that none greater could exist: "For what participation hath justice with injustice or what fellowship hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14)."*

– Pope Leo XIII

# MARXISM

1. Have you encountered Marxist ideas in any of your classes—for instance, in the discussions of “race, class, and gender” that crop up in many humanities classes? How do you react to the attempt to see all history and culture as a series of struggles for power among different groups?
2. Marxism gained credibility by claiming to understand how economics really works. Did Tucker’s analysis convince you that Marxist economics is fundamentally flawed? If so, then how useful is Marxism as a tool for understanding anything else?
3. Even if it is impractical, does Marxism seem somehow more “Christian” to you, due to its emphasis on equality and sharing? Or do you prefer Tucker’s vision of people freely cooperating through the Market economy? How would you argue for it against a Marxist teacher or fellow student?

# Modernism



*"[Modernists] lay the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root, that is, to the faith and its deepest fires.... [T]hey proceed to disseminate poison through the whole tree, so that there is no part of Catholic truth from which they hold their hand, none that they do not strive to corrupt."*

– Pope St. Pius X

*Bonus Essay:*  
*Commencement Heresy*

# MODERNISM

1. Fr. Zuhlsdorf describes how modernist movements in art and philosophy helped man to see himself, rather than God, as the touchstone of morality. What is the danger in this? If we can't rely solely on our reason, what can we use as a standard?
2. What does the author mean by "immanence" and "transcendence"? Could we ever really pray to a fuzzy, "immanent" God—or would it be like worshipping gravity or magnetism?
3. Fr. Zuhlsdorf says that the best way to overcome Modernism is through attending reverent, traditional liturgies—which emphasize, in a hundred subconscious ways, God's greatness and our humble state. Have you ever been to such a traditional liturgy (for instance, the old Latin Mass, or one of the Eastern Rites)? What did you think of it? Was it dry, even dull at first—compared to the "lively," improvised liturgies so many of us grew up with? Was it humbling to attend it?



# Epilogue

1. When the editor says that you should view your college career as a precious, narrow window of time in which to broaden your mind and explore the many routes to Truth, does this sound to you impractical? Is college for you merely a means to finding a job? If so, what opportunities might you be missing? Could you be choosing your career too quickly, without enough information? Could this be as unwise as, say, rushing into marriage?
2. How many, and which, courses are you taking out of sheer intellectual curiosity—and not because they will “lead somewhere” in your life after college? Are you taking any of the eight “core” classes the editor recommends? If so, what are you getting out of them?
3. How faithful are you about doing the reading for your classes? If you find you don’t have time to complete it, when do you think you’re likely to? Do you think that in later life, when you’re busy with work and family, you’ll have the inclination to keep on learning? Which habits are you developing now that will help you do that in future years?