2120 Counselling Foundations Week 5: Understanding Human Nature - Secular Anthropologies

"When God dies culture becomes weightless." (Friedrich Nietzsche)

"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his, real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.." (Karl Marx)

Introduction

This is a vast topic that in an introductory unit can only be handled schematically. It can be approached from a number of perspectives- sociologically/social anthropology, historically, philosophically and theologically.

The approach taken here is that all full and final knowledge of what it means to be human is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The foundation for this is Scripture e.g. John 1:14; Col 2:9; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 3:16;, but can be summed up in the words of the Creed of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)

"our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;
truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body;
consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin;"

The Meaning of "Secular"

The English word "secular" is derived from the Latin term *saeculum*, meaning "of the/this age". It was used in the Middle Ages to indicate separation from religious affairs and involvement in worldly (or time-related) ones.

It has come to be associated with the decline of religion, particularly in Western societies e.g. frequency of baptisms, weddings and funerals in churches. It involves the decline in power and prestige of official religions e.g. state religions in Europe, South America. Historically, this has seen the end of state support for religious bodies e.g. compulsory tithing, legislation to protect religious doctrines e.g. contraception/abortion, the end of religious tests for public office e.g. Roman Catholicism, censorship in literature and science etc. in order to safeguard religion e.g. Galileo.

The French Revolution, for example, was one of the major secularizing events in European history. ("I would like, and this would be the last and most ardent of my wishes, I would like the last of the kings to be strangled by the guts of the last priest" (Jean Meslier? 1664- 1729))

Some of the major cause of secularism are rapid advances in science and technology, religious wars and critical liberal theology.
There has been a reaction to the influences of Western secularity in some traditionally non – Christian countries e.g. the BJP in India, radical Islam in Indonesia. Whilst Marxist states officially promoted secularisation e.g. Albania, North Korea, including the state sponsored persecution of religions, this policy has not been successful. In the United States, secularism is usually framed in terms of the separation of church and state.

"When men cease to believe in God, they do not believe nothing, they believe anything."
(G.K. Chesterton)

Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is the branch of humanism that rejects belief in God and the existence of a supernatural world. Religious humanists (a minority) either see humanism as a religion in a functional sense, or embrace some form of supernaturalism without embracing a formal religion.

The History of Humanism

1. The Ancient World

Humanism has a long history in Western thought. The ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras (ca. 490 -420 BC) said, "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not". This was consistent with his agnosticism.

2. The Renaissance

The flowering of humanism in Europe was during the Renaissance (Latin: "born again"), a movement that affected the cultural, political, social, and literary landscape . Beginning in late 14th Italy Renaissance humanism revived the study of Latin and Greek, with the resultant revival of the study of science, philosophy, art and poetry of classical antiquity. The revival was based on interpretations of Roman and Greek texts, whose emphasis upon art and the senses marked a great change from the contemplation on the Biblical values of humility, introspection, and meekness. Beauty was held to represent a deep inner virtue and value, and an essential element in the path towards God. This humanism was rarely atheistic; though not always Christian.

Renaissance humanists believed that the liberal arts (music, art, grammar, rhetoric, oratory, history, poetry, using classical texts, and the studies of all of the above) should be practiced by all levels of wealth. They also approved of self, human worth and individual dignity.

Noteworthy humanist scholars from this period include the Dutch theologian Erasmus, the English author (and Roman Catholic saint) Thomas More, the French writer Francois Rabelais, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch and the Italian scholar Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

3. The Enlightenment

Radical changes occurred in the climate of Western intellectual culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Often this is called the "Age of Reason" or the "Enlightenment". The Enlightenment may be seen as the fruit of the new approaches to knowledge, including religious knowledge, which began with the Renaissance of the late fourteenth century. Enlightenment thinking was dominated by four principles:

a. Reason: as the proper tool and final authority for determining issues.
b. Nature: in the "book of nature" all may read the laws of God. What is "natural" is what is right.

   c. Progress: the present is generally considered to be an improvement on the past. As reason unveils nature human society moves to a better future.

   d. Autonomy: rejection of external authority. In the light of contemporary knowledge tradition is found wanting. The use of personal reason is paramount.

Whereas the late medieval and Reformation debates were held within an assumption of the truth of Christianity the Enlightenment challenged all assumptions. This meant an inevitable movement away from the tenets of revealed and historical religion (Scripture and tradition) to natural religion, or <u>Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone </u>(Kant). This presented the greatest challenge to Christian theology in its history.

It is important to appreciate the religious environment that paved the way for the Enlightenment. The pioneer of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, set himself the project of bringing peace to Europe through rationality, moving beyond the religious conflicts and wars of this time.

As the seventeenth century saw Europe devastated by conflicts between disputing churches each claiming the revelation of God, it became clear that no solution could be reached within traditional Christianity. A teaching common to all humanity was needed. This had to be natural theology based on reason, and compatible with what is emerging in the realm of science. From the Enlightenment emerged the period known as "Modernity" (see below).

"Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, The proper study of mankind is Man."
(Alexander Pope 1688 - 1744: Essay on Man)

4. The Modern Era

Contemporary humanism defines itself in the following way:

Humanism is a world-wide international movement of human beings, committed to ethical principles devised by human beings for human needs, and to freeing humankind from the fear, superstition and divisiveness often engendered by religion. (Humanist Society)

Humanism is characterized by the following principles:

a. human potential – human beings have within themselves the potential to solve all their own problems and promote their highest good

b. optimism – humanists are optimistic that open –minded education and dialogue can provide a basis for the betterment of our world

c. rational and moral autonomy – there is no need to resort to some higher power or authority in order to solve problems or decide between right and wrong. People are responsible to themselves for their own behaviour.   Freedom of thought, enquiry and expression are essential for reasoned and informed debate.

d. commitment to human equality – all people are to be treated equally and humanely

e. commitment to human rights – the inalienable rights of the individual e.g. education,

women's rights (abortion)

e. commitment to human happiness – humanists are committed to the common good, which is often interpreted as the greatest happiness for the greatest number (utilitarianism)

f. speciesism – this is the view that humans are more important than other species; such a view is incompatible with the anti – supernaturalism of humanism

Humanism is dedicated to the ideal of the universal human family and to the establishment of basic human rights everywhere. It seeks to diminish religious, political caste and ethnic divisions by promoting attitudes of tolerance, respect and mutual caring.

Materialism

Materialism assumes that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications. For a materialist, only what can be seen, tested, and proved is real. This means, for example, the mind is equated with the brain. The scientific method is elevated to the highest authority. Working from this presupposition, Western people have learned to observe regularities and patterns in the material world, and develop a series of laws and principles for almost all areas of life: medicine, physics, philosophy, psychology, economics, and so on. These explanations are thought of as consistent, stable, and dependable. Westerners, including professing Christians, often live as though the material world is more real than the spiritual, as though material cause-and- effect explains all of what happens to us.

Forms of materialism can be found in ancient Indian, Buddhist, Greek and Confucian philosophy. Marxism has been the dominant form of materialism in the modern period. (Philosophical materialism is not to be equated with an overriding interest in the acquisition of material goods and sensory pleasures.)

Modernity

While this term is vague and can be used in different ways e.g. by sociologists, historians, art theorists, theologians etc. it describes not so much a period but an outlook (*modo* = just now). In Europe, through the Renaissance humanists and early modern philosophers and scientists, rational thinking came to replace many intellectual activities that had been under heavy influence of convention, superstition, and religion. The resulting emphasis on human self-sufficiency has come to be known as "modernity".

1. Principles of Modernity

a. turn to the subject, *cogito ergo sum* "I think therefore I am" (subject and object split)

b. absolute truth accessible

c. foundations (first principles) of certain knowledge – either reason or experience

d. confidence in method (progress)

e. rise of naturalism (truth found in nature)

f. ascent of natural sciences: knowledge (empirical) cf. faith (private opinion)

g. universal, objective, non—historical truth unrelated to any particular story e.g. Marx, Hegel (metanarrative)

h. historical — critical method in theology

The most important of these principles is the first. In this perspective the self-reflecting on self becomes the source and centre of knowledge.

2. The Impact of Modernity on Christianity

a. preoccupation with rational truth — rationalism, apologetics, propositionalism

b. preoccupation with technique — marketing, media

c. preoccupation with answering questions set by the non-Christian cu1ture
   e.g. liberalism — seeks points of contact that make possible an understanding of the gospel, conservatism - conformity to audience needs; seeker sensitive, user friendly.

d. privatisation and individualism of faith

e. subjection to selfism — intrusion of therapeutic and psychological theories of need, sentimentalisation of conversion

f. naturalism in theology

("Apology" offered by Bill Hybels and the leaders of the Willow Creek Community Church, one of the most influential churches in America. One of the quotes from Bill Hybels is this:

"We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own. In other words, spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programs but through the age old spiritual practices of prayer, bible reading, and relationships. And, ironically, these basic disciplines do not require multi-million dollar facilities and hundreds of staff to manage.")

3. The Breakdown of Modernity

1. Social and Historical Factors

a. collapse of grand visions e.g. communism

b. rapid social change e.g. feminism

c. large scale and insoluble crises – World Wars, Third World debt and poverty,

environmental degradation, unemployment, AIDS (undermining of modernist optimism)

d. growth of cities, migration – mixing of cultures and world views

e. influence of the media – "multiple worlds", space- time fusion

f. post-modern ideology – academic theories attacking modernism

g. electronic information explosion – a global world

2. Criticism of Modernity

A. Anthropology

a. splits body and soul – dualism; the mind is the real person

b. denies the reality of being-in-the-world ie. embededness of humanity

c. ignores culture – we see and reason through the lens of culture

B. Theory of Knowledge

a. meaning of author is historically embedded.

b. truth is relational

c. language is a social phenomenon with rules (language games).

d. language is a system of relationships and differences (structuralism).

e. the self is a product of cultural systems, of which the intersecting relationships of language are the highest expression. The self is therefore not something that can be objectively abstracted from its cultural and conceptual environment.

C. Ethics

a. idea of universal truth of morality discoverable by isolated self is a faith—story.

b. disagreement on basic concepts of goodness and justice

b. critique of modernism's absolutising of the non-personal

(1) scientism - science the key to all important knowledge

(2) technicism - power over nature to achieve human ends

(3) economism - higher standard of living the ultimate goal of life.

4. Some Christian Criticisms

1. The problem of individualism

   a. essentially foreign to the pre-industrial world.

   "Our society is an arch of stones joined together which would break down if each did not support the other."

   (Seneca)

   b. forces conspiring to produce the modern self-consciousness

      (i) renaissance confidence (14th - 15th century)

      (ii) personal interpretation of the Bible (16th century)

      (iii) dominance of epistemology in philosophy (17th century on) Descartes cogito ergo sum Kant "dare to think for yourself"

      (iv) political liberty (18th century on e.g. French Revolution)

      (v) rise in living standards

      (vi) self set against the world (subject-object dualism) or self versus self. (psychoanalysis etc.)

   c. the social contract: I choose to relate to others in order to meet my needs (physical, emotional, sexual, financial).

2. The anti-Christ character of Post-Christianity

   a. humanism   -   secularises the biblical pre-eminence of the human race

      (Ps 8:4-8)

   b. historicism   -   secularises the biblical emphasis on history (history is decided by large scale laws of development, not by God, e.g. Hegel, Marx).

   c. politicisation -   secularises the message of the kingdom of God (Marxism)

   d. secularisation -   an imitation of the desacralisation of the world achieved by Christianity (animism, polytheism, occult) cf. Gal 4:3,9; Col 2:8.

   e. revolution   -   secularises the new creation.

      (Blocher, H. 1994 Evil and the Cross Leicester: I.V.P.)

Postmodernism

1. The term "Postmodern"

   a. Transition from one age to another cf. medieval to modern.

   b. A general socio-cultural development at all levels (popular, intellectual), not just a movement within society.

2. Illustrations of "World View" shift

   Brady Bunch to Simpsons; Star trek to Star Trek: The Next Generation; Young Talent Time to MTV.

3. Features of the post modern phenomenon

a. pessimism rather than optimism (progress)

b. cooperation rather than conquest of nature ("green", suspicion of technology)

c. non-rational rather than rational forms of knowing (New Age mysticism)

d. search for 'wholeness' rather than autonomy (independence)

e. interest in community (network not hierarchy)

f. relativism and pluralism rather than objective truth (absolutes)

g. primacy of choice (rather than <u>what</u> is chosen)

4. Factors feeding post modernism

   a. collapse of grand visions e.g. communism.

   b. rapid social change e.g. feminism.

   c. large scale and insoluble crises - Third World debt and poverty, environmental degradation, unemployment, AIDS.

   d. growth of cities.

   e. influence of the media.

   f. post-modern ideology.

   g. electronic information explosion

5. Post-modern preferences

<u>Modern</u>	<u>Post Modern</u>
content	technique
substance	style
words	images
action	spectacle
exposition	entertainment
truth	feeling
conviction	sentiment
absolutes	relative

An illustration of the move to Post-modernism (Erickson 1998: 14)

(in the form of a question from a music test)

1930 Define rhythm.

1960 The movement of music in time, including tempo and meter, is called _____

1990 The movement of music in time, including tempo and meter, is called:

a. melody

b. harmony

c. rhythm

d. interval

2000 The movement of music time, commonly called Rhythm, makes you feel:

a. I don't understand the question.

b. I think this is an unfair question.

c. 'I don't know what the word Rhythm means'.

d. It doesn't matter how I feel, as long as it is my own authentic feeling.

6. Post modern moods

    a. alienation from the past (no sense of continuity with history)

    b. aimlessness (no clear goals greater than self)

    c. suspicion / disbelief (cynicism)

    d. search for the transcendent (drugs, sex, rock 'n' roll)

    e. victimisation (I am like this because this was done to me)

    f. personalisation (my story rather than our story)

    g. pragmatism (what 'works')

7. Anthropology

    a. the self is 'minimal' or multiphrenic. (no real self, or multiple selves)

    b. modern humanist understanding of self-constructed and self-centred ego is itself a construct.

    c. the self as an object does not exist but is under constant construction by cultural influences e.g. by self-help groups, psychotherapy, image consultants, fitness centres.

    d. selves are consumed. (capitalism, consumerism)

8. Theory of knowledge

    1. Some illustrations.

        a.   the mind is not 'the mirror of nature'

        b.   the three umpires

    Have you heard the joke about the three umpires who were having a drink and a chat after a game? The first ump' says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." The next ump' says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third ump' says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't noth'n until I call 'em." Here we have the pre-modern, modern and post-modern epistemologies!

    The pre-modern view maintains a direct correspondence between external reality and our perception of it - truth is truth and the truth can be known. Strikes are strikes and the ump' can call 'em the way they are. A typically modern view acknowledges the subjective element in all our knowing. External reality, according to this view, is filtered through our perceptions - truth is truth, but my perception of the truth may differ from yours. The ump' tries to call 'em as they are, but can only call 'em as he sees 'em. The post-modern view collapses the objective into the subjective entirely, so that there is no longer talk of external reality but of many realities - no longer can we talk of the truth,

but only of truths. If the ump' calls it a strike then it is a strike, but he might just as well have called it a ball and then it would have been a ball!

2. Hermeneutics and philosophy of language

   a. no necessary connection between a sign (word) and that which it signifies (object)

   b. language can only self-refer, no mediation of being (reality) as such cf. ancient elephant cosmology.

   c. language as a constantly changing chain of signifiers

   d. no one reading or final meaning of a text is possible

   e. no way to get "behind" language to authenticate a meaning, object, reading. (No transcendental signifier).

3. Theory of reality.

   a. non realist rather than realist - no access to "things", truth is a convention (non-essentialist)

   b. non-representationlist - words can't present what is not available

   c. coherence theory - internal consistency of meaning systems

   d. pragmatism - truth for us cf. in itself i.e. what works for me

   e. metanarratives are legitimising myths e.g. science depends on the myth of progress and the value of increasing knowledge.

9. Ethics

a. most of the values of liberal modernism are accepted.

b. truth questions are replaced by personal states e.g. happiness.

c. pragmatism reigns in the absence of God e.g. bioethics.

10. The Impact of PostModernism on Christianity

a. the Church follows the initiative of the age e.g. socialism, feminism, post-modernism.

b. the gospel becomes reinterpreted and repackaged in terms of people's "felt needs".
Evil becomes privatised as unhappiness, needs replace sin, "help" replaces truth, self-esteem is substitution for the image of God, the individual exists for him/herself and demands the church "do something for me".

c. succumb to the era of professional services, rather than true passion for God and the gospel

d. very little commitment to the "go" commands of Jesus and discipleship of others

e. the aim of the church becomes "send them home happy"

f. the church becomes anthropocentric rather than Christocentric

Religious Pluralism

A. Principles of Pluralism

a. inaccessibility of absolute knowledge of reality leads to pluralisation of truths.

h. the Ultimate or Real is beyond all our grasping myths.

c. shift from the requirements of faith (cognitive) to those of love.

d. all major religious opinions are equally valid.

e. discovery of one's own experience rather than a rationality is primary.

f. intolerance for exclusive claims

g. pictures of reality e.g. the wheel, the mountain, the blind men and the elephant.

B. A Christian Critique of Religious Pluralism

a. religious pluralism in its opposition to classical religious assertions is itself an anti—metanarrative metanarrative.

b. the religious pluralist, in denying other positions, assumes a privileged position outside of any particular framework of understanding. This is to invoke a metacriterion inconsistent with relativism.

c. pluralists ignore that they are part of a culture and community of understanding i.e. a post—modernist one.

d. in principle pluralism is intolerant of all other positions.

e. the diversity of religions is such that they cannot meaningfully be taken to refer to the same reality e.g. Buddhism and Christianity.

f. the analogy of reality chosen (e.g. mountain, elephant) determines the conclusion reached. Why not use another analogy?

The Failure of All Forms of Humanism

A. Humanism leaves humanity without hope

1. Humanism attempts to replace God with man at the centre of all things.

2. This required a foundation on which man would stand.

3. "We can become what we will." (Pico della Mirandola 1486) cf. Nietzsche "will to power" > Hitler; "re- invent oneself".

4. The "I am that I am" has to be replaced with the "I am" of the individual. The great "self – made man" e.g. Renaissance man

5. However, the humanist enterprise built on the freedom and power of the will crumbles under the necessity of death.

6. Whereas in Christianity, the death of Jesus is the ground of the eternal hope of resurrection, humanism leaves humanity without hope.

This is a copy of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), it shows two vastly learned men of the Renaissance in front of the instruments of achievement of their age. The men however are trapped and frozen in the frame, for between them is a dynamic hovering skull – human knowledge has no answer to death.

B. Humanism leaves humanity without meaning

1. Loss of metanarrative leaves a vacuum of meaning.

2. If everything, according to postmodernism, is a matter of perspective, then all truth claims are equally valid. Perception is reality. Something is true if it is true for me.

3. Since there are no universal principles of right and wrong, then there is no framework for morality. E.g. for the rejection of Nazism.

4. Meaning is a notion that has simply been constructed by human beings e.g. because of genetic programming to ensure the survival of our DNA.

5. The post modern self lacks any basis to make sense of human experience or provide a vision for life.

6. An "ethics of consent" e.g. pro –choice, fails, because individual decisions cannot be isolated from community effects (e.g. pornography and sex crimes) and not all humans can give consent (foetuses, surrogate children, paedophilia, the very old and sick).

The Christian Alternative in Contemporary Culture

"The answer to the challenge of postmodernism is to hear in postmodernity God's judgment on the follies and failings, the sheer selfish arrogance of modernity and to look and pray and work for the resurrection into God's new world out beyond. We live at a great cultural turning point. Christian mission in the postmodern world is a matter of the church grasping the initiative (perhaps particularly in planning for the millennium celebrations) and helping our world to turn the corner in the right direction." (N.T. Wright)

1. Within the postmodern worldview Christianity is as true as any other position.

2. This opens the opportunity for the credibility (not so much the truth) of the Christian message.

3. If the world is attractive, the Christian needs to present the God and Father of Jesus as more attractive:

a. the overwhelming love of God in the sacrifice of Christ

b. a framework for meaning and morality

c. an eternal vision

d. satisfaction of the human longing for an experience of something greater than themselves (transcendence)

4. The Gospel for a Postmodern Culture

a. primacy of community – enact the truth of the gospel in the church as a social community (2 Cor 3:2ff.)

b. presentation of the biblical metanarrative in such a way that the particular concerns raised by post-moderns are addressed

(1) anti—totalising (authoritarian) features — God's sensitivity to suffering e.g. Exodus, Jesus, Early Church

(2) isolation, aimlessness - election to favour with God, the story of the people of God, creation as our home

(3) ecological concerns - creation as a gift to be stewarded

(4) victimisation - in the order of' redemption God willingly becomes the victim of' all oppression (Isa. 52: 13 — 53: 12; Ph. 2:5 — 11; Rev, 5).

c. live the values of the kingdom of God — neither modern nor post— modern i.e. life—style which confronts culture, Christ as Lord of all life, pray and fast.

5. Christianity as the True Humanism

a. the church is called to testify by its quality of life to Jesus in all the spheres of life

b. "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it" (Aquinas) – the renewal of humanity for the glory of God

c. this involves serving God in all the intellectual, recreational, artistic, scientific, vocational, domestic, social etc. spheres of life