

Sierra Leadership Network: Month 7, Year 1

Participation in the Sierra Leadership Network (SLN) is a process of adult learning. It is the responsibility of the participant to do their assignments and seek out the necessary accountability. It is the responsibility of the participant to schedule time with their mentor, not the other way around. Here is a checklist of this month's exercises and space for comments. All useful generated materials should be placed in your Sierra Leadership Network binder. The mentor will look over the exercises and be given opportunity to add their own comments. Be sure you take your binder to the quarterly meetings at Granite Springs Church to also be available to the SLN directors.

Month 7, Year 1

Date Completed

____/____/____
Mentor Comments

Secular Humanism

[Estimated time: _____]

____/____/____
Mentor Comments

Analyze Popular Culture

[Estimated time: _____]

____/____/____
Mentor Comments

Counter cultural living

[Estimated time: _____]

Participant Signature

Mentor Signature

Secular Humanism, Scientism

Read and digest the following

Read the document “A Secular Humanist Declaration” found at <http://www.secularhumanism.org/intro/declaration.html> . Take some time to digest it and ponder it’s assumptions and implications.

It is important to note right off the bat that even though many Americans would feel uncomfortable with the tone and starkness of the document, it fairly explicitly states the essence of the public culture in this country. People may endorse all manner of organized, unorganized or inconsistent religious hodgepodge’s on top of this position, but when it comes to how we as a society come to agreement on “what is public truth” this position generally wins. If something really matters, it is built on this.

For a good critique of this worldview Huston Smith’s book Why Religion Matters is helpful. Part 1 of the book is good, part 2 will give you a window into how post moderns are attempting to construct a new metaphysic (that which is beyond physics). He claims that there are two philosophical assumptions that all of this is built upon:

1. The scientific method is, if not the only reliable method of getting at truth, then at least the most reliable method for getting at the truth. (You can see this stated in point 8: Science and Technology).
2. The material world, the things that science deals with, are the fundamental and most basic elements of the universe.

He quite rightly notes that these positions are in fact simply assumptions. They represent a macro worldview, an assumed perspective on how the world is ordered. For the sake of simplification, we are going to talk about 3 macro worldviews: the traditional worldview, the modern worldview, and the post-modern worldview.

Traditional Worldviews:

Most of the world during most of it’s history has held a traditional worldview. The following are 5 common perspectives embraced by most worldviews we would consider “traditional”. (You can find a fuller description of these in Smith’s book in chapter 2)

1. Spirit is fundamental and matter derivative: In the Biblical worldview God who is spirit brings the material world into being. Spirit is foundational, material is derived and dependent upon the spiritual.
2. Human beings are the less who have derived from the more. God creates the man and the woman in his image.
3. The traditional worldview points towards happy endings. The conclusion of history in the Bible is the last judgment where God brings his children into his kingdom in a new heaven and a new earth.

4. The world is meaningful throughout. History is not simply about cause and effect and events are not merely random or mechanistically determined. Meaning infuses existence and people try hard to access and understand that meaning.
5. People “belong” to their world: Check out the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism.

I want to be clear that Christianity represents only one of many traditional worldviews. The five points made above are also generalization, if you study other religions you will find anomalies and exceptions but generally speaking you will find that most ancient peoples, religions and cultures conform to the 5 points listed above. Even in eastern religions with very different perspectives on who or what is God, the nature of history and the nature of reality, you will find these 5 elements generally present.

The Modern Worldview

In the west a different kind of understanding of reality arose, quite likely fueled by the heady successes achieved through the efforts of science and technology. Basic struggles long plaguing humanity seemed to be resolved through technology, diseases cured, behaviors understood, etc. The history of philosophy that accompanied and supported this movement is beyond the scope of this paper, yet in the developed world (Europe, North America, significant parts of East Asia) modernity took root. They were given political expression in Western democracies, Fascism and Communism, (Monarchies were increasingly discredited and sidelined as traditional worldviews waned.) Ground breaking efforts in biology (Darwin) and psychology (Freud) helped the west to see mankind not so much as the masters of the natural world (as stewards) but simply a part of it. Modern worldviews differed dramatically on the 5 points mentioned above:

1. Matter is fundamental, the spiritual is unknowable or fictitious. Since we cannot by empirical means verify spiritual claims they must be delegated to the private sphere, unhelpful for the development of public policy or morality.
2. Human beings are the most powerful and evolved beings we know of, evolved through a long chain of chance, and cause and effect.
3. Happy endings are fictitious. The universe will end, we can be happy that we won't be around to experience it. Hopefully we can avoid the destruction of this planet by war and disease, but that destiny lies in our hands and means.
4. Meaning is created by people who want to find it. Since it cannot be empirically discovered or identified, meaning is beyond the scope of public conversation or policy.
5. “Belonging” implies purpose and meaning, those are excluded.

Freud used a term “sweetening the sour apple” to describe how modern man deals with the brutal “reality” of the modern worldview. We invent for ourselves myths, stories, religions, gods, meaning, purpose, etc. because we are simply happier with those things than without them. To a certain degree that is permissible, allowable because it helps people cope, but we must avoid these kinds of notions leaking into the really important human activities such as science, economics and public policy. Jesse Ventura’s famous quote to Sam Donaldson, “Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak minded people who need strength in numbers.” Marx also agrees in calling religion “The opium of the people”. He also said it “eased the pain even as

it created fantasies”. These quotations aptly clarify different kinds of knowledge, one public, based on “empirical evidence”, and the other, private and therapeutic.

The 20th century, however, was not kind to notions of the inevitability of human social evolution. Two world wars and plenty of small genocides immersed western societies in a profound doubt concerning our ability to not destroy ourselves. Life without meaning, purpose, destiny, or a happy ending is indeed a rather dreary existence. Few fully face up to that reality.

Postmodern Worldviews

Post modernity grows out of the dismal world of modernity. It is hard for me to say at this point that postmodernity (the term thrown around but difficult to define) is necessarily distinct from modernity because at heart it seems to still embrace the basic elements of that world view. It seems to me (at this point at least) to be more of a collective attempt to leave “the tunnel” as Smith calls it. I think in many respects postmoderns are really moderns on vacation, because the essence of their worldview is an “anything goes” denial of the empirical box that moderns find themselves in. You will find postmoderns dabbling in all kinds of things, long dead religions and philosophies like Gnosticism, eastern religions with western twists, and self constructed Mr. Potato head religions made up of almost every conceivable combination. Huston Smith’s attempt as found in Pt. 2 of his book is a more sophisticated and educated “least common denominator” approach, trying to synthesize elements of traditional worldviews and religions into some kind of coherent whole.

The difficult I find with many postmodern schemes is the issue of true belief. Despite our considerable capacity for self-delusion and denial our truest belief, to whatever degree we are conscious of it, is what dictates (always inconsistently) our behaviors and deepest expressions of the heart. The ultimate test of the genuine article (in terms of one’s belief, not necessarily the truth of that belief) is whether you would in fact stake your life on it. For the most part most Americans IMHO live as secular humanists with a religious veneer.

The Matrix

The Wachowski brother’s hit movie in 1999 “The Matrix” is essentially a post modern anthem. Neo, the one, an interesting amalgam of Messiah, Buddha, and pop culture hero notions in order to achieve almost every *summa bonum* (the ultimate good) imaginable (discover truth, become enlightened, save humanity, etc.) must achieve complete belief and consciousness of the derived nature of reality inside the matrix in order to fulfil his destiny. Neo’s challenge is the challenge of every post modern, to really somehow deny modernism’s assumptions and worldview despite the whole of reality around it, all the time not being able to fully grasp the complete picture of the world he inhabits.

Analyze Popular Culture

Choose one of the following 3 assignments:

1. The Matrix

- a. Rent or buy the original “The Matrix” and “The Matrix Reloaded”.
- b. Write a brief paper on the worldview of “The Matrix”. What are the important elements of that worldview? What are the big questions it deals with? How do the answers compare with Christianity as you know it?
- c. Design a youth or young adults Bible study based on the movies. Note scenes you would wish to show as part of the study, note Biblical passages you would use to make the points you want to make.

2. Rent and look at again “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “Bruce Almighty”

- a. Write a brief paper on the worldview of “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “Bruce Almighty”. What are the important elements of that worldview? What are the big questions it deals with? How do the answers compare with Christianity as you know it?
- b. Design a youth or young adults Bible study based on the movies. Note scenes you would wish to show as part of the study, note Biblical passages you would use to make the points you want to make.

3. Rent “The Truman Show”. Try watching the movie twice and pay special attention to names and details.

- a. Write a brief paper on the worldview of “The Truman Show”. What are the important elements of that worldview? What are the big questions it deals with? How do the answers compare with Christianity as you know it?
- b. Design a youth or young adults Bible study based on the movies. Note scenes you would wish to show as part of the study, note Biblical passages you would use to make the points you want to make.

Counter Cultural Living

OK, it's time to get personal. All of us have accommodated and succumbed to "the world" as the Bible calls it in the sense of evil and sin in our cultural context. In our churches we often narrow our focus to specific moral and legal areas. In those terms, if we don't overtly rob, cheat on our spouses, or go astray of the law our Christian communities won't malign or condemn us. The truth is, however, sin is far more subtle and devious, it infects the assumptions that we base our most fundamental life decisions upon. Take some time this month to focus on the teachings of Jesus and how often he directly attacks the cultural and personal idols that we base our security and righteousness upon. As you are reading Jesus teaching, note in your journal (if you keep one) or do a journal this month for the ways that you see in your life "the world" has infiltrated your worldview at its most basic level and discuss this with your mentor.