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## Sommerville's "Religious Ideas for Secular Universities" - Book Review

Ken Badley

George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

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C. John Sommerville. *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. 200 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 9780802864420.

**Reviewed by Ken Badley, Education, George Fox University**

With *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities*, John Sommerville continues a line of enquiry he began in his 2006 book, *The Decline of the Secular University*. There, he argued that the American university has found itself on society's sidelines by excluding religion from academic discourse. In doing so, it refused, or at least failed, to address a dimension which, as it turns out, most people outside the academy consider fundamentally important. Despite having lost its focus, its coherence, and its confidence (4), the university can regain its public voice if it finds the grounds and the courage to address again the whole human, including the religious dimension. Sommerville intends both *The Decline of the Secular University* and *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities* to help provide the conceptual framework within which the university might recover that voice. In the present title, Sommerville hopes to address as well the criticism that his earlier volume lacked specific, practical suggestions.

Central to the framework he offers here is an understanding of religion that differs significantly from that currently holding sway in the academy. Most readers of this journal would agree with Sommerville that everyone operates out of some ultimate concern and gives their final allegiance to someone or something, whether to justice, or rationality, or money, or to the Christian God or some other god or gods. Furthermore, many readers of this journal would agree that at the end of the day, such allegiances are religious in nature, a point for which Sommerville gives credit to Paul Tillich but which he could as easily have borrowed from dozens of others, especially from thinkers in the Kuyprian tradition. By adopting this wider definition of religion, Sommerville sets himself apart from the academy, which has preferred to restrict the definition of religion to those world religions included typically in, say, an introductory text on comparative religion.

This broad definition of religion – that everyone (including everyone in the academy) operates on the basis of fundamentally religious commitments – lies at the foundation of and becomes a great strength of Sommerville's argument. I suggest this line of argument is a strength for several reasons. First, it provides coherence to the variety of topics Sommerville treats in this book, ranging from the history of childhood to the place of the arts in society and the role of the daily press, to the culture wars. Once we classify fundamental commitments as religions, we can test them, especially their capacity to answer key questions about the nature of the good and the nature of human difference, questions that religions have always attempted to answer. Second, readers unfamiliar with such wider definitions of religion may gain new insight into their own intuitions that the rules of the game have, until now, privileged some visions of the good life unfairly while excluding others from the conversation. Third, Sommerville's adoption of the wider definition allows him to offer genuinely helpful suggestions for those in the academy who would seek for it the place of respect it once held in society. Granted, those suggestions, or at least the path to their implementation, may strike the secular academy as overpriced initially; he offers *preposterous* and *frightening* as two possible adjectives the academy might use to describe his proposal (32). But if Sommerville is correct that the academy must be able to address the foundational questions of goodness and the human, then it should consider following his suggested path, price notwithstanding. In his words, the university needs "religion's seriousness about values" (31), for no one can discuss the ultimate questions without reference to religious categories (109).

Ultimately this wider definition of religion may leave Sommerville vulnerable to attack by the very academy to which he directs his argument. Aggressive secularists, whether in the academy, Hollywood, government, or the news media, recognize what is at stake when someone suggests abandoning the restricted definition of religion in favor of the wider definition proffered by Sommerville. Organizing a society around a wider definition of religion will create a genuine pluralism in which all visions of the good life are recognized as fundamentally religious and no vision has privileged access to society's microphone. In such a setting, the acknowledged religions – usually those recognized only in the restricted definition – gain a new voice. The corollary of course is the loss of privilege for the hitherto unacknowledged secular religions. The vulnerability of Sommerville's argument lies right here: aggressive secularists in the academy will recognize immediately what they have to gain and lose with the adoption of such a definition. One would expect that the intended audience of Sommerville's book – administrators and faculty leading secular universities – will recognize what they have to lose and consequently will, more than other readers, resist his argument. Meanwhile, those least in need of persuading will be the most likely both to read and

to agree with Sommerville.

Sadly, academic followers of secular religions who reject Sommerville's broadening of the definition of religion through a (mis)calculation of their losses may miss much of what they have to gain. In *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities*, Sommerville points out several ways the academy can reclaim ground it ceded voluntarily in the twentieth century. If the academy reoccupied this ground, it might have society's ear once again on important questions about what it means to be human and on how to get along with each other. Sommerville is nothing if not charitable toward the academy, and he takes no delight in the irony that it had no sooner completed its century of secularization than society awoke to a new century of "resacralization" (to borrow Peter Berger's term). The new century has meant that the costs of secularization in the university are clearer now than ever before, especially the loss of a sufficient foundation to define and protect the human good and, for that matter, to define the human itself. As never before, the academy needs to reconsider its earlier pledge of allegiance to rationalism and naturalism and then recover its ability to ask the questions of meaning and purpose that people continue to insist on asking. If the academy can recover this ability, society may again stop to ask it for directions.

Some readers may experience, as did I, frustration with Sommerville's informal writing style and his lack of documentation. At some points his book feels more like a romp, or at least more like an extended *Harpers* or *Atlantic Monthly* essay than it does like a carefully argued book. The lack of documentation makes some of his claims appear to be merely claims rather than carefully reasoned or documented conclusions. However, even those readers who long for more documentation from Sommerville likely will smile at his clever and, at points, cheeky writing. For example, after noting the typically moral tone of the editorial page in a newspaper, he writes that its effort to point its readers in humane directions "may be as ineffectual as the philosophy page, otherwise known as the comics" (175). Earlier, he slips in deftly that sometimes "bad things happen to good countries" (25). Witty wording like this goes at least some way to answering the question Gertrude Himmelfarb raised in *On Looking into the Abyss* back in 1994: "Where Have All the Footnotes Gone?"

At a couple points, clever wording does not go far enough, however. The rationale for Sommerville's inclusion of a brief history of the formation of the biblical canon remained elusive in my reading of *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities*. In two other chapters, he reploughs ground from earlier volumes, notably in his chapters on the daily-ness of the press and on the history of childhood. Those chapters do fit in his argument finally, but readers may get a feeling that his own familiarity with those particular bits of geography has led him to assume that a quick review will suffice for us as it does for him and that we will accept assertions instead of argument. Sommerville's breadth of reading and thought, evident everywhere in his book, allow him to paint with broad strokes. But the strength of broad strokes may also be its weakness.

Still, rewards await the reader who shows patience with Sommerville. As it turns out, he has given us an essay not just about the academy but about the whole of – and perhaps the hole in – contemporary society. His title might lead one to expect a small number of concise and orderly religious observations of possible benefit to secular universities. If at times Sommerville's book feels like it is going to deliver less than the title's promise, readers may be delighted to find that, in the end, Sommerville delivers more.