

The Decline of the Secular University: Why the Academy Needs Religion

C. John Sommerville. 2006. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0-19-530695-3, \$22.00.

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The secular university is hardly in the place its proponents had hoped it would be a hundred years ago. It has weak political influence, offers little social leadership, and provides scientific inquiry that is increasingly driven by money-making ventures such as patenting. In his book *The Decline of the Secular University*, historian John Sommerville (Professor Emeritus at the University of Florida) argues that secular universities' waning importance and influence in society reveals that they have failed to meet their own goals. He offers his diagnosis of the problem: "A century ago it seemed reasonable to restrict the university to questions that we could answer definitively, to everyone's satisfaction. We are now finding that this leaves out too much" (p. 21). Sommerville argues that the increasing "marginalization" of the university is a direct result of a commitment to secularism itself. He makes clear in the book, however, that the alternative he proposes is not a system of religious indoctrination, but instead a university that truly lives up to its commitment to seek knowledge by admitting religious voices to the dialogue.

My first reaction to Sommerville's book was to the title itself; it struck me as alarmist. As an assistant professor in a large public university, I was concerned that Sommerville thought the work done by myself and my colleagues lacked meaning or relevance. (Indeed, it is clearly his strategy to scare academics into questioning the value of the work they do.) Within this book's 150 pages he expresses serious concerns with the current directions of science, religion, social science, business, and history in the secular university. However, it becomes clear that his desire is, ultimately, to build up rather than break down these disciplines.

As a Christian and an economist, my attention was most drawn to aspects of the book that discussed social science. In the introduction, Sommerville expresses a concern that seems particularly applicable to economics and business:

We have lots of programs that tell you how to make money and be useful to the economy. But where would you go to learn how to spend your money intelligently? That is, where does one learn

what is valuable *in and of itself*? What is the point of money? (p. 8, emphasis in original).

His concern about the role of values in economics is evident in his chapter on the fact/value dichotomy (known to most of us as the positive/normative distinction). He speaks of economists specifically, writing: “Their subject matter, after all, is human well-being or ‘weal,’ wealth in the truest sense.” Other chapters that speak quite directly to social scientists are those that address the notion of teaching *about* secularism vs. teaching secularism itself, and the moralizing that occurs even in an ostensibly secular environment. He concludes by addressing all disciplines as he explores the possible contributions that religious scholars could make to breathe some new life into the current university climate.

Sommerville’s discussion of the fact/value dichotomy reminds us that our methods of research can often determine the scope for the facts we discover. This insight reminded me of earlier work by James Bradley and Kurt Schaefer (1998) in which they note that economic models and methods can sometimes appear more objective than they actually are. Sommerville makes the point that ultimately, facts should be recognized as value-laden. In reflecting on this issue, I have considered how to convey this in the economics classroom using policy illustrations. For example, I could tell my labor economics class that “most minimum-wage earners are not below the poverty line” while simultaneously “a full-time worker making a minimum wage has earnings below the poverty line.” These two “facts” are both true, but seem to tug at different values—with the second making the listener perhaps more amenable to increasing the minimum wage. This seems to be the kind of image Sommerville has in mind as we educate students to understand the values built into our concepts. Sommerville also suggests that the converse should also be true—that “values must be treated as facts”—but I found his argument much less clear in that direction.

In his chapter on teaching *about* secularism vs. teaching secularism, Sommerville emphasizes the way in which religious voices appear to be excluded from academic discussions. Since merely “teaching about secularism” should not cause this situation to arise, he argues that the university is actually promoting the secularist worldview itself rather than allowing it to be one of many possible legitimate ideologies. At the same time, he is very clear that he does not want to replace this indoctrination with a different type of dogma:

As we all recognize, our tax-supported agencies must be careful not to impose religious views on the public. Besides the issue of freedom, even religious sympathizers recognize the deadening effect that imposing dogma generally has, whether it is religious or Marxist (p. 93).

It is ironic that this point about the “deadening effect” of imposing dogma corresponds well to Sommerville’s diagnosis of the current state of the secular university: that adherence to secular ideology to the exclusion of a broader discussion of ideas has created the current malaise he observes.

While this insight on secularism is important, I do not think Sommerville specifically acknowledges the extent to which the emphasis on secularist ideology may vary by professor or subject matter. As a Christian who has been in public university culture for seven years so far, I have not sensed that most of my graduate economics professors or current colleagues are subversively promoting a rigid secular ideology. Indeed, my department alone includes (at least) practicing Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Unitarians. Perhaps an important question is whether the people of faith who do exist in secular economics departments are helping promote (perhaps accidentally or out of habit) the exclusively secularist viewpoint that causes Sommerville’s concerns.

In the same chapter, Sommerville also laments a loss of depth in education due to an increasing focus on the fleeting issues of the present to the exclusion of the broader issues of humanity. He argues that the existence of “daily news” has created a market for news as a product that is “the paradigm of planned obsolescence.” Many of us who teach economics and business should probably think more about this, since many of us like to use news articles in class to help bring some of the theoretical issues to life. The practical implementation of a more holistic approach is not immediately obvious, but Sommerville surely hopes his readers will think about this.

The chapter on “moralizing” was of interest to me because it is the section in which Sommerville creates his conceptual delineation between the humanities and social sciences. He suggests that the humanities approach life “from the inside” in a quest to “understand human intentions.” In contrast, social sciences view human life “from the outside” with the hope of developing “statistical expressions of general laws of behavior.” While I initially felt a bit slighted, Sommerville’s point seemed to be that the humanities were particularly crippled by the secular “moralizing” that implicitly requires tolerance of all ideas (rather than just all people). This

causes humanities discussions on human motives or preferences to quickly become uninteresting. However, social science can run into some of the same issues. Perhaps we economists should think carefully about how we teach topics with deep moral content—for example, discrimination in the labor market. If statistical discrimination is efficient, why do my labor classes continue to agree that it is not “good”? And if someone suggested that it *was* good, would we have to end the argument quickly by agreeing to disagree?

Sommerville closes his book with three chapters that could be considered his vision for the changes he hopes to see. He first emphasizes the importance of involving religious voices in this transition to a better kind of public university. However, he admits that this would not instantly resolve anything, and “might even complicate matters,” since the structure for this involvement is yet to be determined. This is where the author leaves it up to the reader to be creative in imagining how this new system might work. He also emphasizes the need to “foster an intellectual culture that puts respect, appreciation, and humility on the same level as the one remaining academic virtue of suspicion.” Surely humility is a virtue sorely needed in economics in particular! Finally, Somerville suggests that his reform movement may begin with an increased respect for students and openness to the ways in which their religious worldviews interact with their education. Students do not necessarily know how to do this “integration,” but Somerville notes that “[s]ome of that is even now going on in religious colleges and universities, which must take themselves more seriously.” Thus both the public and religious institutions of higher education have a key role to play in enriching academic discussion by addressing issues that really matter and providing a legitimate perspective to be critiqued alongside those that already exist in the academy.

Reference

Bradley, James K. and Kurt C. Schaefer. 1998. *The Uses and Misuses of Data and Models*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ■