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Abstract Review of *The Decline of the Secular University* (2006), by C. John Sommerville.

A SINKING SHIP?

Ralph C. Hancock

Review of C. John Sommerville. *The Decline of the Secular University*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 147 pp., with index. \$22.00.

Not long ago, at a convention of political scientists, after a formal discussion of the role of the judiciary had ended and the conversation had spilled over into a civil if quite animated debate, I overheard what seemed to me a very telling remark. In a final, somewhat exasperated plea, one of the protagonists offered this distillation of his concerns: “All we are asking is that restrictions on individual freedom be based on reason.”

What, indeed, could be more . . . well, reasonable than the requirement that deliberations on disputed matters of public policy appeal to the common ground of reason? The trouble is, though, that we seem no longer to be in common possession of an understanding of reason that is substantial enough to give us any guidance. To be sure, evidence of the technological power of modern science pervades our existence, and we trust the experts that the foundations of the scientific method and of pure logical and mathematical reasoning are secure. But technology is a tool that cannot supply a purpose, any more than can logic or mathematics.

Does anyone in fact believe in reason anymore—reason not only as a formal method but as a substantive, authoritative principle? Do we even know what it means, for ourselves as individuals or in our

communities, to look to reason for guidance? Of course we know how to appeal to the norm of rationality to disqualify arguments we oppose, showing them to rely upon moral or religious beliefs, or other inherited prejudices—that is, convictions or intimations that reason cannot establish beyond doubt. But if this negative function is all that remains of reason, then, short of an appeal to some nonrational guidance, are we not left truly destitute, unable even to hear the Socratic question that gave rise to the Western idea of reason: how shall I live?

C. John Sommerville is convinced that we have indeed lost our faith in reason and that this loss deeply undermines the integrity of our universities. More precisely, the secular rationalism that presided magisterially over the modern age and that marginalized religious questions is now itself teetering. The moment is therefore ripe, the author argues, for a reconsideration of the place of religion in higher education. His reflections ought to be of deep, even urgent interest to all who are committed to the ongoing project of faithful higher education that then President Jeffrey R. Holland once called “a school in Zion.”¹

“My thesis,” Sommerville states, “is, first, that the secular university is increasingly marginal to American society and, second, that this is a *result* of its secularism” (p. 4). When the modern, secular American university was founded about a hundred years ago, the general hope and expectation, sometimes quite explicit, was that “professors would replace clergy as the official authorities on life’s questions” (p. 8). In the contemporary, postsecular university, this ambition has been all but completely abandoned, leaving only a complacent habit or fashion of rationalism—a rationalism committed to the acidic criticism of all norms and institutions except those upon which university intellectuals themselves depend. The decisive question—what does it mean to be human?—is one that these intellectuals are utterly unable even to ask. This, Sommerville argues, is because, in eliminating the religious dimension of questioning, the secular university is approaching the point where it will have “eliminated the human distinction as

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A School in Zion,” in *Educating Zion*, ed. John W. Welch and Don E. Norton (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996), 143–64; see Doctrine and Covenants 97:3.

well”—have eliminated, that is, our very ability to articulate our own humanity (p. 38). Sommerville does not shrink from the prescription that follows quite evidently from this diagnosis: “The academy needs to learn to speak theologically.”

It would be a big mistake, however, to assume that Sommerville has in mind some completed theological system that he believes can give an adequate account of human things. On the contrary, he criticizes the notion of religions as “tight propositional systems,” or what John Rawls, the most influential philosopher of secular liberal justice, called “comprehensive views” (p. 127). Sommerville prefers instead to see religions as “perspectives” of inquiry, or as “narrative” traditions that make it possible to explore the human condition in all its richness. It is only by defying the barriers that have been built up between secular and religious disciplines that “in the university today [we] could . . . face the overwhelming question of human significance” (p. 33).

The walls defining a secular viewpoint are already falling all around us, Sommerville observes. The fact/value dichotomy, or the idea that the study of facts could be insulated altogether from questions of human meaning, is under pressure, not so much from external critiques, religious or otherwise, as from secular scholars including Hilary Putnam (philosophy), Amartya Sen (economics), and Francis Fukuyama (intellectual and political history). Sommerville summarizes Putnam’s argument, for example, in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* “that what we call ‘values’ are subject to the same kind of objective consideration as what we call facts” (p. 42). Once the collapse of this dichotomy registers in the university, the door will be wide open to “debates involving values,” and so “religion may be heard from in areas from which it was banished” (pp. 45, 46). To be sure, we will be left without a universal method for settling such debates. But this suits John Sommerville’s idea of higher education just fine: whereas, since the Enlightenment, we have assumed that “we should be striving to simplify,” “the task ahead will be to complexify things” (p. 46).

If many old-fashioned secularists seem a bit defensive, even desperate, these days—quick to associate their enemies with some

threatening (though in reality very tiny and marginal) corps of theocratic fundamentalists and to link these in turn with Islamo-fascists—this may be because they see or sense the walls safely enclosing their rationalist realm crumbling around them. In a suggestive little chapter entitled “Science Gets Strange,” Sommerville points to evidence that the barriers between thinking with maximum rigor and thinking about human meaning are eroding even in what one might imagine to be the safest stronghold of secular scientism—that is, the natural sciences. At some point the question of humanity emerged at the furthest reaches of the physical sciences, in the form of an awareness of dozens of astonishing “Anthropic Coincidences” that link the genesis of reality as we know it to the requirements of the existence of human beings and therefore of the human intellect. We seem thus to be seeing what might be called a Second Socratic Turning of the Western Mind, as the most ambitious scientists are liberated to wonder at “the universe’s becoming aware of itself through humanity” (p. 79). “Thus,” Sommerville observes, “there is now wonder and mystery on the boundaries of science that suggest a religious awareness if not a religious response” (p. 77).

Just what reason might mean for us now, in this postsecularist era, as we venture out beyond the once-comfortable confines of the fact/value distinction, is of course an open question. Professor Sommerville is hardly to be blamed for failing to give a definitive answer. In a difficult chapter on “Trouble Judging Religions,” he does seem to lose control of his own argument somewhat as he implicitly confronts the question of what standards or styles of judgment might emerge on the horizon as we leave behind the clearly mapped terrain of secular rationalism. Openness to religious sensibilities and insights does not remove the necessity of exercising judgment. Thus the question we now confront is “how to judge religion or religions and by what standards.” But here we realize that we are not sure even how to define religion or whether belief-orientations of all peoples are adequately addressed in terms of the Western understanding of religion, heavily conditioned as this understanding is by a monotheistic tradition. Thus Sommerville risks being unable to say just what it is toward which

reason should now be open. At one point he seems to retreat behind a clear distinction between belief and intelligence, arguing that “intelligence is built on belief,” and not the reverse (p. 64). But this is precisely the dichotomy that grounds the rejected distinction between Is and Ought, or between fact and value. By falling back on this distinction, the author risks endorsing a relativistic irrationalism as the only alternative to rationalism.

The only way to avoid this vitiating recourse, I think, would be to articulate candidly the insights available in a Christian understanding of humanity and divinity (as the author often very promisingly begins to do) and to be ready to stand by the judgments implicit in such an understanding, at least until other insights grounded in another tradition proved richer or more fecund. Sommerville’s Socratism is Christian, and his Christianity is Socratic, and he should articulate it and defend it as such, not as just one possible belief commitment among many.

Prof. Sommerville’s sometimes spirited polemic will be welcomed by many who promote the interests of religious universities, including Brigham Young University—as well it should. But on closer inspection it should be clear that his book is as much a critique of “religious” higher education as of secular. Both in fact have been impoverished by taking for granted a stultifying distinction between faith and intellect. If religious universities are not to justify the suspicions of would-be rationalists, they must overcome their insularity and “take the intellectual dimension of their faith more seriously” (p. 58). This would mean something much more than topping off a conventional, secular, discipline-bound lesson with an edifying nod to the importance of faith. If faith is really fundamental to understanding, then it might be time, for example, to critically examine the narrowly rationalist assumptions underlying the disciplines we are paid to promote. If we are not teaching about secularism, Sommerville suggests, we are still teaching secularism—teaching it all the more secularly, one might say, because we are not aware of what we are teaching (p. 86). That such a critical engagement with the assumptions buried in our conventional disciplines might lead to confrontations with complacently secular

accreditation agencies (p. 143) and “assessment” regimes (p. 139), and with the consumerist, mercenary expectations of many of the university’s constituencies, might be regarded as additional benefits.

Sommerville’s call for mutual openness between study and faith serves to remind us of the rich possibilities of “a school in Zion” and of how far we still have to go even to begin realizing these possibilities. Are we clamoring for passage on a sinking ship?