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Religion in the National Agenda: What We Mean by Religious, Spiritual, Secular

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C. John Sommerville; Religion in the National Agenda: What We Mean by Religious, Spiritual, Secular.

(Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Leslie C. Poe

If you find yourself searching for a modern commentary on the influence of religion in national systems of politics, education, culture, and science, the title of this book might appear to be just the ticket. But you would be wrong. Instead, you will want to pay more notice to the subtitle, for in his latest work C. John Sommerville focuses very lightly on the national agenda and very heavily on the various definitions of religion and its peers in the repertoire of spiritual jargon. Instead of preparing for political and cultural observation, approaching this text requires the stretching of your best philosophical and linguistic chops.

Sommerville, a noted historian from the University of Florida, adds to his rich body of work on the secularization of modern culture (including the secularization of the academy) with this 204-page attempt to define religion and analyze how definitions influence dialogue and practice in several areas of national concern. He begins by acknowledging the confusion surrounding the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” a frustration that finds its root in the ambiguous, culturally specific, and highly individualistic nature of religion. Sommerville attempts to reconcile that confusion with a nominal definition, a definition of the word rather than the thing, “which is all that can be done with something as elusive as religion” (Sommerville, p. 2). In the midst of a review of many great thinkers’ attempts to solidify a definition—Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Rudolf Otto, Clifford Geertz—Sommerville offers his: “a certain kind of response to a certain kind of power” (Sommerville, p. 28).

At this point, Sommerville begins to examine the interaction between definitions of religion and specific areas of public affairs, beginning with education. This chapter is of particular relevance to most readers of *Growth* due to his address of secularism in public education (and increasingly in many historically sectarian institutions). His critique of the absence of religion in the curriculum of non-sectarian education is compelling, for he proposes that to censor religion is to essentially teach secularism; something is always being taught. This argument continues in his address of religion as it relates to law, political variety, science, and theology. Sommerville concludes by offering definitions for “secular,” a term that happens to be as ambiguous as “religion.”

In essence, *Religion in the National Agenda* is an attempt to define the ambiguous and to examine how such ambiguity affects those who relate to the term. Christian student affairs professionals at both faith-based and secular institutions will find chapter 3, “Why Religion and Education Challenge Each Other,” most applicable. For those at faith-based institutions, Sommerville’s attention to the dangers of religious study will be thought-provoking. Within Christian higher education, are we allowing students to *learn* religion or merely requiring them to *study about* religion?

Studying something translates it into terms more familiar and seemingly more basic. Such study will naturally question religion rather than letting it question us... The difference between learning and studying is in the attitude—the humility—involved (Sommerville, pp. 54-56).

Any institution that integrates faith into its academic and co-curriculum should take note of Sommerville's distinction, a warning against the trap of producing graduates who know much about religion but who have failed to be transformed by it in the process.

For Christian student affairs professionals at secular institutions, Sommerville's words may serve to put a vocabulary on the anti-religious aura that is so tangible on so many campuses. In environments where any mention of religious belief—particularly Christianity—is labeled as intolerance, Sommerville points out the paradox of such an argument:

There is an irony in the fact that this amounts to proselytizing for tolerance! Understood properly, toleration means allowing for proselytizing, not censoring it. For proselytizing implies the freedom of one's audience, rather than seeking to coerce it... One feels there is a lack of confidence in the kind of intellectual exchange that ought to characterize university discussion when we show this desire to censor positions in advance (Sommerville, p. 119).

Modern education has championed the cause of tolerance, yet sends an underlying message of tolerance for everything but religion.

Religion is the one area in which Americans' commitment to individual freedom falters. Courts which cannot allow even release time religious instruction for those who choose it have required students to attend lessons in sex education and values clarification over religious objections (Sommerville, p. 73).

Furthermore, Sommerville proposes that intentional neglect of religion in the dialogue of education may be a liability; instead of closing minds, religion actually opens the mind to increased possibilities. "Whereas logic tightens our thinking, religious awareness may promote mental flexibility" (Sommerville, p. 80). For children, college students, and adults, the concept of God and the virtues related to religion expand mental horizons beyond the limits of rationalism and secular humanism as covered in the majority of classrooms.

Those working with college students at both types of institutions are likely to have noticed the growing tendency of students to describe their personal system of beliefs without use of the term “religion,” instead preferring terms like faith, spirituality, relationship, and community. In some instances, students view “religion” with hostility and have symbolically and intentionally removed the term from their descriptions of personal belief and practice. Sommerville’s examination of definitions and meanings behind these terms may shed light on these trends within current student populations. Another intriguing element of Sommerville’s address is the prevalent concerns of imperialism, multiculturalism, and general emphasis of Western ideas related to religion. While he is sensitive to the unique geographic and cultural underpinnings of religious experience and jargon, he seems to caution the contemporary tendency to over-emphasize these influences.

While these and other valuable insights may be gleaned from this book, most student affairs professionals will find it broad, abstract, and beyond practical application for everyday practice. With the exception of those who are at home with philosophy, the average reader is likely to be overwhelmed with the roundabout linguistic breakdowns and back-and-forth arguments within the majority of the book’s chapters. *Religion in the National Agenda* is not beach reading; most paragraphs require concentration and multiple readings. If philosophy and abstraction is your cup of tea, by all means pull on your best galoshes and wade through the philosophical muck! But if you are looking for a book to inspire your everyday work with college students, look elsewhere.

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