

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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HOW CHRISTIAN IDEAS MIGHT CHANGE THE UNIVERSITY

C. John Sommerville

Editor's note: This fall, our Monday Night Class, "Religion, Scholarship, and the University", is using John Sommerville's book, The Decline of the Secular University (Oxford University Press, 2006), as a starting point in an ongoing conversation about the role of religion in the university. This book has helped us frame a discussion that began with Dr. Sommerville explaining why he wrote the book and offering his thoughts about how religion might actually contribute to the university. From there, we have heard from a number of University of Florida faculty who have told us how they see religion making a contribution in their own work, either as an area of inquiry or as something that shapes their work personally. This essay is an abridged version of Dr. Sommerville's second lecture on how Christian ideas could contribute to the university.

Previously, we looked at the reasons that this seemed like a good time to write *The Decline of the Secular University* and challenge the mindset of the academy. So far, the reviews of the book have been positive, but there is one point they all raise. They complain that I don't offer many constructive suggestions for changing things. So in response to that I'd like to offer some suggestions about how Christian ideas might actually change the university.

Actually, in the book I wanted to leave that matter of positive responses open so that a whole generation of Christian scholars would be challenged to contribute from their own

disciplines. It was unrealistic to think that such a short book could offer the blueprint for our future. This is going to be a big job because religious scholars and students are so out of practice. But there are also some things we could start doing immediately. And things that even students could do.

First, Christians need to think what our goal is. Are we trying to *prove* the main Christian doctrines? Probably not, when you think what proof means. Proof involves three things: shared assumptions (since you can't prove

anything to someone who doesn't share your assumptions about how things work), then agreed knowledge, and finally a common logic to show their relations. Then it's a matter of showing that your opponent's assumptions require her to accept your conclusions, in light of that knowledge, organized by that logic. So proof is an exercise of power over your opponent, forcing her to surrender.

Power over opponents seems completely out of place in Christianity.

Jesus wasn't doing this. Rather, his goal was to create faith or at least raise issues of faith, trust, dependence, commitment. In contrast to proof, Jesus' effort to generate faith actually respects a person's freedom. It aims at opening the person's mind, and you are more likely to do this with questions, as Jesus did, than by thundering away at an "opponent." You need to show the person his own assumptions, his

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own faith, whatever it happens to be. Now we should understand that faiths aren't something foreign to the university. As historian George Marsden states, "broadly understood, faith in something or other informs all scholarship." Faith comes before thinking as well as after. Scientists had to have a belief in the regularity of nature *before* they could discover it, and as Einstein used to say, they often went decades with only that faith to sustain them, while they fought with the evidence.

So we'll be looking for questions that could begin this process of opening minds. They will be questions pointing to faith, broadly speaking, or showing the faiths that underlie our thinking. And, students specifically should be able to use these questions in conversations with fellow students, with TA's and even, with due modesty, with professors.

You might start with (1) "Have you ever read the new book called *The Decline of the Secular University*?" I hoped the book could be used this way, as a conversation starter as it's being used here. Being able to focus on it might take the heat off you a bit, so that you can partner with others in discussing the questions raised in it. I didn't answer a lot of the questions that I ask, so people will be challenged to discover their own answers.

When you are talking about issues that revolve around certain assumptions about human nature, you could ask: (2) "Doesn't this whole discussion turn on your definition of the human?" We previously pointed out how central the view of the human is to the New Paradigm university. That is, a university dominated by professional programs (more than by science), which all serve some understanding of human needs. Secular universities are seriously unprepared for this question, having just been involved in denying that human is a meaningful concept. Both science and postmodernism have real problems making sense of the human. But religions, and certainly Christianity, are very largely about the human situation, and developed the concepts and the language we must use in thinking about it.

But religions, and certainly Christianity, are very largely about the human situation, and developed the concepts and the language we must use in thinking about it.

If you ask this, you need to be prepared to have the other person ask "Well, what's your definition?" Again, you can deflect the issue away from yourself a bit by saying "Well, a *Christian* definition would probably emphasize responsibility and other ethical dimensions, or a relation to something basic to the universe, we would say God." You'll be directing attention to Christianity, as a religious knowledge tradition, instead of yourself. You could also helpfully suggest that "A *secular* definition would probably put each individual at the center of their world." Kind of a staggering idea, isn't it?

You shouldn't feel like you've got to say everything all at once or rush through a whole elaborate explanation. There will probably be more to the conversation and the topic of Jesus might easily come up. You can indicate how he is your ideal image of the human and also of the divine. How utterly surprising it is the world's most widespread religion began the way Christianity did. How unique it is when it is truly centering on love rather than triumph, and how we criticize it by its own ethic.

A discussion of (2) might lead to a third question, (3) "Shouldn't a definition of the human be about our *difference* from animals?" That's what definitions do, distinguish one thing from all others. Definitions of Homo Sapiens are definitions of an animal species, and are largely about the similarities. "Human" differs from Homo Sapiens by being about ethical and personalist issues, even more than about intellectual ones.

By the way, if your friend objects that human is only a word, a concept, you can remind her that so are species, which are generalizations. Words are not unimportant, they are our ways of organizing reality. Sciences are, in effect, languages which allow us to talk about different parts of reality. To sound erudite, you might even add that this is what the "linguistic turn" in twentieth-century philosophy was all about -- Wittgenstein and all that.

To take the conversation to another level, (4) "Isn't it true that evolutionary psychology (formerly called sociobiology) failed to explain any value except prudence?" I think this is true, and will make you sound pretty advanced. Prudence is what "survival value" is

all about, but it isn't very high on anybody's list of virtues. So this question is meant to show them how little evolution has to do with any discussion of the human. It doesn't help with all those words we *must* use of humans that we *can't* use of chimps or cabbages, like responsibility, truth, justice, sanity, wealth, purpose, trust, freedom, humane. The book even shows how even the concept of "science" points to an unbridgeable gulf between humans, the creators of science, and the creation they are studying.

In some arguments you might need to ask (5) "Is tolerance something for ideas, or for people?" Tolerance for ideas just means Relativism - the idea that every idea is equally valid, which is not an ethical matter. Tolerance for people is a virtue, deriving from Christian charity. This might squelch a lot of nonsense about "being tolerant of everything except intolerance." That gets things exactly backwards, meaning not tolerating people who do not tolerate all opinions. After all, judging opinions is what intelligence means. And in fact, everybody finds some opinions that are simply out of the question. Or we should hope they do.

Still another line of questions could include (6) "What are you absolutizing in that argument?" Which means, what is going unquestioned in your thinking? No one likes to think that they are unaware of important things. They might come back at you with, "What would you absolutize?"

You have to be careful here. Remember that only one thing can be absolute. That's what the word means: everything else is relative to the one thing that's absolute. And in Christian theology, that one thing must be God. So Christians shouldn't claim to have a bunch of absolute values, which would just be ignorant. All *values* find their proper relation in God, so they are all "relative" to God. But that's such a difficult concept that I think you could get away with saying that the Christian view is that only charity, love, can be absolutized. But you'd have to add that you would often need Christianity to explain what that meant in practice.

Finally, in some arguments where you sense a clash of viewpoints, you might want to ask

(7) "Which explains which?" Or as [Study Center Director] Dr. Horner often puts it "What frames what?" Maybe the most frequent way this comes up is in assessing religion as against science. And that becomes a really interesting issue. Does religion best explain science or vice versa?

There are three sciences that have made a stab at explaining religion, or explaining it away. They are sociology (which sees religions as society's glorification of itself), psychology (which sees it as a residue of infantile fears), and rational-choice economic theory (which applies cost/benefit analysis to the whole enterprise). None of them actually explain the core idea of religion, which sees religion as a certain kind of response to a certain kind of power (the response and the power both being understood as beyond anything else we experience). Instead, these sciences only explain certain religious behaviors, ideas, or attitudes.

They are often successful in this, but it doesn't entirely dissolve the reality of the concept.

On the other hand, religion can explain science fairly well. Historians of science talk a lot about how Western science was born in monotheistic metaphysics, and how it has been both encouraged and retarded by religion over the years. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was largely the work of

seriously Christian thinkers like Kepler, Boyle, Newton, and Pascal. They saw it as a way of understanding God's creation.

Historians of science have also considered why other civilizations did not follow the path of the Jewish and Christian West in this regard. One of the reasons has got to be the fact that Asian religions were more interested in escaping the world than understanding it. So maybe this question of "what caused what" is more interesting than one would assume. If we tried to see science as one part of our whole religious point of view, we could think of it as showing the other half of God's reality, and revealing a different part of God's character.

The goal with all these questions is to wake friends up to the fact that secularism is blinding them to some really basic issues. Secularism is an impoverishment of thought. Religion can be a way of opening our minds, and quite relevant to intellectual questions. As

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I mentioned, the book might suggest other questions.

But you're wondering, does any of this actually change the university? Or are these questions on too personal a level? After all, they don't suggest some reorganization of departments or colleges or whatever. Nevertheless, it seems to me that they would change the way we think about universities. They would change what we call "the academic culture." The main intellectual virtues might cease to be suspicion, criticism, and competition. They might change to appreciation, openness, humility, seriousness. Proof of our views would be no more important to universities than understanding other views. Religious ideas would not banish non-religious ideas, but there would be a more level playing field, as we say. And religion, or at least some religions, might change the university simply by being recognized as serious knowledge traditions that deal with ever-present questions.

After my book came out, the student newspaper at the University of Iowa sponsored a debate over whether the university should be more open to religion or not. They printed the reactions of four students. Two thought that

religion should be accommodated, but the other two said it would start controversies. Is that so bad? Aren't universities ever supposed to discuss things? Right now, the secular university avoids controversy by silencing religious voices. The public may be conflicted about this, like those students were. American society is way more religious than universities are, but still we are a little afraid of what religious voices will say, since we haven't heard them in so long. And we'd all agree that religious controversy could be very disruptive. Having some confidence in our position should keep us from being abusive.

To be clear, accommodating Christian and other religious voices would not make universities Christian. They would remain secular in the sense of being neutral. Religion wouldn't rule. But it need not be ruled out. Universities wouldn't be officially Christian unless they somehow privileged Christian viewpoints. That would not be good even for those Christian viewpoints. We need to keep them honest, and you do that by leaving them open to discussion.

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**Selected passages from "Trouble Defining the Human",
a chapter in *The Decline of the Secular University*:**

We are so used to thinking of "humanism" and religion as rivals that we may not have noticed that the cultural struggle now is between some obscure kind of humanism on the one hand and naturalism on the other. When American universities became officially secular, a century ago, the problem of defining the human was not foreseen. Much of a traditional Christian intellectual culture was taken for granted. Mistaking their habits of thinking for rationality itself, those founders thought religion was redundant and could be ignored without loss of substance. It has taken a century to discover the intellectual void that results when religious categories are systematically rejected wherever they are discovered. Thoughtful commentators now speak of "secular inhumanism." (p. 24)

But what does it mean, and what difference would it make, to say that the language of the human is more at home in a religious discourse? The difference is that it would reopen our universities to a wider philosophical and cultural heritage.

The terms we use to describe human affairs are not comfortable within a language of naturalism. We have not seriously attempted their translation into that language since B. F. Skinner gave it up a half century ago. When we say that "human" is a religious term, we mean that it has coherent meanings in a religious discourse. It relates grammatically to other concepts like "purpose," "creation," "evil," "equality," "concern," "beauty," and "wealth," which bog down any naturalistic analysis. All these terms have recognized uses within religious discourse. If we want to use them at all (and clearly we must), it will be hard to avoid religious associations. If universities rule out all such discussions as soon as they recognize them as religious (involving even Plato, for instance), then serious discussion will migrate to some other venue...Of course we will need to refine this religious discourse. It is seriously rusty from disuse. But the academy needs to learn to speak theologically. This undoubtedly sounds alarming, but we've been doing it all along, on a primitive and unconscious level. (p. 31-21)

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RICHARD HORNER

With this issue of *Reconsiderations* we welcome Todd Best back into his role as Editor. Todd is now our full-time Director of Programs, which include publications – both our website and *Reconsiderations*. Todd also manages Pascal's Coffeehouse and develops reading groups and graduate student initiatives. We welcome Todd and his wife Holli back to Gainesville and to the Center, and we congratulate them on the birth of Marin O'Connor Best, their first child. Marin was born on Thursday afternoon, October 5th, and both she and her mom are thriving. Although Marin's birth kept Todd from leading our reading group that afternoon, we should also note that Marin's middle name was inspired by Flannery O'Connor, the subject of our reading group that Todd led two years ago.

As we welcome Todd back to the Christian Study Center and *Reconsiderations*, we also want to thank Zachary Beck for his excellent work as Editor over the past year. Zachary oversaw volume five of *Reconsiderations* and did so while also working on his MA in English and teaching composition at the University of Florida. Zachary has been a member of the Center's community for several years, and we deeply appreciate all the ways he has enriched our lives. We wish him all the best in his studies, and we seek God's blessing on all he does in years to come.

SOMMERVILLE'S *The Decline of the Secular University* CREATES CONVERSATIONS

As we reported in the August edition, John Sommerville's book *The Decline of the Secular University* is off the presses (Oxford University Press, to be specific) and sparking conversations all around. The Christian Study Center continues to be grateful that what began as the first series of Culture Seminar lectures in 2001 has spawned a book and now is providing ample space to talk about the importance of religion as a source of knowledge in higher education. The book has received reviews in *The Washington Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Ed.*, and it has generated discussions in places like the University of Iowa. Locally, Dr. Sommerville has taken invitations to speak on his book at Goering's Books, the Humanist Society, and of course at our Monday night class at the Center on "Religion, Scholarship, and the University." We're hopeful that many more conversations will emerge from this important contribution.

Religion, Scholarship, and the University: Part 2 – Christian Faith and Critical Thought: "(Un)natural Selection: How We Got Four – and only four – Gospels"

Our Monday night class continues with a case study on Christian faith and critical thought (Oct. 23-Nov. 20, 8pm). Dr. Charles Hill, Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, will be addressing the class, followed by response and dialogue from Dr. Leo Sandgren, UF Dept. of Religion, and Dr. Richard Horner, Executive Director of the Christian Study Center. Dr. Hill will offer a case study around the more general question of the relationship between critical thinking and Christian faith by specifically addressing the issue of the reception of the four gospels in the New Testament. In the cultural milieu of the *Da Vinci Code* craze, as well as the recent hubbub over the "Gospel of Judas", this part of the class will be oriented around controversies and speculations that arise from the modernist scholarship of the secular university. See our website for details (christianstudycenter.org).

In other news... In addition to our Director of Programs becoming a father this fall, we also celebrate our Administrator Nora Wickham becoming a grandmother for the first time. Bella Celestina was born on September 17th in the wee hours of the morning, weighing 5 lbs., 11 oz. Congratulations, Nora!...On November 13th, Executive Director Richard Horner will be speaking at Covenant Presbyterian Church on the campus of Reformed Theological Seminary...And finally, congratulations to Christian Study Center President of the Board, Dr. Jay Lynch, in his being inducted into the Academy of Distinguished Teaching Scholars at the University of Florida.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCE:
EMERGING SCHOLARS
NETWORK SEEKS TO
NURTURE AND MENTOR
CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS**

Michael Hickerson

Editor's note: In this review essay we offer the Emerging Scholars Network, a national project of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. ESN is one of those rare projects that dovetails very well with what the Christian Study Center is centrally committed to: helping the university be a place where Christian thought can make a contribution to learning and research. Since Dr. Sommerville's The Decline of the Secular University opens up a conversation for ways to address the secularism of the university, we asked ESN to tell our readers about their project, its purpose, and goals. We hope readers who are potentially pursuing a career path in academia will consider joining ESN to take advantage of this rich resource.

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's Emerging Scholars Network (ESN) seeks to change the university from the inside out, offering a redemptive presence in thought and culture in our society. Now over 2,400 members strong, the purpose of ESN is to identify, encourage, and support the next generation of Christian scholars, at all stages of their academic careers, who seek to be a redeeming influence within higher education. Founded by the current Director of Faculty Ministry, Stan Wallace, in 2004, the Network is growing quickly as Christian scholars seek to honor God in their calling to the university.

ESN members have come together to address four questions fundamental to a Christian's role in the university:

- 1) Why should I consider an academic vocation?
- 2) What do I need to learn about Christian thought and practice to be faithful within my academic calling?

- 3) How do I navigate the various stages and transitions of an academic career?
- 4) Who can help me at each stage of my professional development, and whom can I help?

Through ESN, many scholars are seeking ways to be an encouragement and Christian influence for positive change in the university. To begin, ESN works to connect emerging scholars with one another, both personally and professionally. An online forum facilitates discussion on the integration of faith and learning, Christianity in the academy, and other vital topics. Next, ESN provides a query for scholars to find others in their school, discipline, or geographic region to pursue God and scholarship together. Furthermore, ESN's mentoring program has recently been expanded to meet the needs of students and scholars at varying academic and professional stages. Christian mentors are needed at every level of accomplishment in academia, including undergraduate, graduate, doctoral candidates, post-doc students, assistant and associate professors, and tenured professors. At every stage, there is a need for encouragement, intellectual conversation, and coaching. We invite all Christian scholars to apply as ESN Mentors.

In addition to personal connections, ESN supports Christian scholars with the resources they need to be effective in the university. Currently, ESN partners with approximately 20 other Christian organizations that share its concern for emerging scholars. After registering online, ESN members are eligible to receive member benefits such as discounts on publications from partner organizations. The ESN website also keeps a running calendar of upcoming events and conferences of interest to Christian scholars, in a variety of disciplines. Bibliographies links to Christian professional societies, and a collection of articles about the Christian life in an academic context are just some of the resources currently available only to ESN members via the limited-access ESN website. Membership access is immediate upon registering.

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The vision of ESN, though it is firmly rooted in the university, extends far beyond students and faculty, or, phrased more correctly, extends far *through* students and faculty. The Emerging Scholars Network hopes that, over the next thirty years, its members will have a concrete, redemptive influence among the people, ideas, and structures of the academy, and that their influence will extend to the church, the broader society, and the world. To learn more about ESN's Mission and Vision, read about "The Four Questions," become a member, or apply as a mentor, please visit www.emergingscholars.org. Or contact the ESN personnel directly by email at info@emergingscholars.org.

Michael Hickerson is Emerging Scholars Network Associate Director, Provisional Appointee.

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Even Church-related colleges and universities would need to allow discussion of non-religious positions. Colleges serve all of society, and will reflect its thinking to some degree. And even as individuals we are amphibious creature. We live in a secular reality as well as a spiritual reality. Both are of God's creation. It is part of our situation as human beings to try to negotiate these two worlds.

The upshot is that I suspect that once Christian arguments and perspectives are admitted more freely into the university they will not primarily cause trouble. To the contrary, they could seem rather convincing. After all, a lot of religious truth is built right into nature. But Christians must be wise in how they offer their arguments.

C. John Sommerville is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Florida, and he serves on the board of the Christian Study Center. Throughout his career, Dr. Sommerville's work has traversed the secularization of various cultural touchpoints in England and the United States.

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

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The Emerging Scholars Network hopes that, over the next thirty years, its members will have a concrete, redemptive influence among the people, ideas, and structures of the academy...

FALL CALENDAR

Monday Night Class:

"Religion, Scholarship, and the University, part 2: Christian Faith and Critique"
featuring a case study on "(Un)natural Selection: Why We Got Four - and only four - Gospels". Dr. Charles Hill (Reformed Theological Seminary), Dr. Leo Sandgren (UF Dept of Religion), and Dr. Richard Horner (Christian Study Center). Mondays, through November 20th, 8pm, Study Center Classroom.

Reading Group:

Bobo's in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There by David Brooks. Thursdays, Nov. 2 and 16, 12:45 pm, Study Center Conference Room.

Please check our website at www.christianstudycenter.org for the latest information and previous issues of *Reconsiderations*. If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call us at 352-379-7375

Reconsiderations is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, whose purpose is to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life.

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