



**John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity**

**Guest: Linda Raeder**

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**WOODS:** I was just mentioning to you before we went on together that as I've been thinking about guests to bring on, I've been thinking in terms of books I've read over the years that really surprised me, or startled me, or that I learned something from, and I thought about your book *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity*. The thesis in there is quite interesting, quite provocative. John Stuart Mill is, of course, considered to be an icon in some ways in the liberal canon, so it's important for my audience in particular to hear this material. So let's start off with the most basic of questions: who was John Stuart Mill?

**RAEDER:** Mill, as you said, is widely regarded, and I had this opinion of him when I began my research—sort of the last great classical liberal thinker in the Anglo-American tradition. He was a pivotal figure in the 19th century. He was the sage of England and mentor to the world. His most well-known essay, of course, is *On Liberty*, which almost everyone has read and everyone loves. And so Mill has the reputation for being a great champion of individual liberty, and I think even among libertarians and classical liberals and so forth.

Someone had once suggested to me in casual conversation that no one had ever done anything on the religious side of John Stuart Mill, and I thought, well, that's a perfect topic for me. I'm a student of Hayek, and one of Hayek's hobbies was he used to collect the private letters of John Stuart Mill and his wife, Harriet Taylor, and I thought that would be a perfect project for me. I like to work with people I admire, and I thought I will do Mill's religious thought.

Well, in Mill's case I have to say my opinion of him dramatically revised with increasing familiarity with his actual work, especially, and this, I think, is the reason for why my research was so novel. When I began research, Mill's private correspondence with Auguste Comte, the French thinker, had just recently been translated from French to English, and previous scholars, but most of them in the Anglo-American tradition don't speak French and didn't have access to that work, and what I discovered, and I am sad even to this day, I am not happy about this, is

that Mill is not what he portrayed himself to be. He was not really in the end a friend of liberty, and it's related to what can only be regarded as his religious mission.

Mill's lifelong purpose, and I would even say his overarching purpose was to remove, or eliminate, the vestiges of Christianity from Anglo-American society, or Western society, and replace it with a new religion that he adopted—the so-called religion of humanity that he adopted from Comte. And Mill spent his entire life, from the time he was a very young man to the very last essay he wrote, attempting to realize that goal. And for me what was most disappointing is that he was not above manipulating his audience by using his allegedly philosophical works as actual tools to further his reform mission, his religious mission. He is sort of like Marx. You know how Marx once said that the purpose of philosophy is not to understand the world, but rather to change it? Well, unfortunately, I think Mill was doing the same thing. He was disingenuous in some of his works. They were manipulative. They were deliberately designed, as a strategy, to lead the reader to the conclusions that he wanted. He talks about this openly in his letters about how he has to keep silence on the question of religion because no one will read him, but he can surreptitiously lead people to these conclusions all the same. It's a very sad story, actually. And so at the end of the day, I have lost respect for Mill, and he's not—and I'll get into this if you're interested in why his religious mission is bound up with his ultimate abandonment of the principle of liberty.

**WOODS:** I do want to get into that. I want to share something with you. Thankfully, this book was within reach here at my desk: *Classical Economics* by Murray Rothbard. It's volume two of his Austrian perspective on the history of economic thought. I don't suppose you've seen this book, have you?

**RAEDER:** Not that part—

**WOODS:** Okay, this is going to be a wonderful surprise for you, then. I'm glad you haven't, because in the bibliographical essay, you will love this one sentence. Rothbard writes, "It is difficult to think of anyone in the history of thought who has been more egregiously and systematically overestimated as an economist, as a political philosopher, as an overall thinker, or as a man, than John Stuart Mill." (laughs)

**RAEDER:** Well, you know I love Rothbard. I met him shortly before he died, and what an outstanding, wonderful scholar he is.

**WOODS:** Oh, absolutely.

**RAEDER:** Thank you, Murray, wherever you are. Thank you.

**WOODS:** Can you believe he writes sentences like that even in a bibliographical essay? It goes to show you can't skip any part of a Rothbard book, even the bibliographical essay you have to read.

**RAEDER:** Yeah. He's amazing.

**WOODS:** All right, before we get into the religious aspect—which, of course, is the key to your book—I do want to ask a little bit more about Mill’s views on liberty because I think they’re relevant to some modern libertarian controversies. Let me describe one of those controversies, and see if you recognize in this themes from Mill. There has arisen over the past I don’t know how many years a disagreement among libertarians, some of whom call themselves thick libertarians, and others call themselves thin libertarians. The thin libertarians say that the libertarian view is about non-aggression. It’s not about telling people how to live. It’s not about non-conformity. It’s not about individualism even, really. It’s just about non-aggression. If you want to go live in a commune, as long as you’re not bothering anybody, go ahead and do it. If you want to live and have a bizarre lifestyle, you can do that, but if you want to be a perfectly bourgeois person, you can do that also. The thick libertarian version would say: if you want to be a real friend of liberty, it’s not enough just to go after the state. You’ve got to go after all the social obstacles that stand in the way of the full expression of my individuality, my individual choice to embrace different kinds of lifestyles. We have to go after all forms of oppression of the individual. So the message then becomes muddled. Instead of just clearly non-aggression, it becomes, well, we have to contribute to the overall flourishing of human beings or something. And then the message gets obscured. Do you see any parallel here in the thinking of Mill?

**RAEDER:** Oh, absolutely, well, because one of Mill’s chief significances is that he changes the classical liberal understanding of the proper role of government in society. Classical liberalism is essentially on the side of what you called thin libertarianism, that the great enemy is the abuse of power by government, arbitrary coercion by government, and that the whole movement was to put limits on the power of government, the organized agent of coercion. Well, Mill changes that. In fact, he scorns and dismisses that and mocks that as being absurd, and he says, no, the great purpose of government is, what’s his famous quote? “The improvement of mankind.” Well, that is an open sesame, that’s a never-ending, eternal project that justifies all kinds of governmental coercion. So it seems to me, and tell me if I’m wrong, but that sort of thick libertarianism you discussed sounds more like Mill’s project of eliminating all sources of possible repression of individuality and so forth. I think that comes from Mill and not from classical liberalism.

**WOODS:** Yeah, so this is a problem, and he’s a bad influence in a number of ways, I think.

Let’s get into this religion of humanity stuff. Now, you’re right that he seems to—he’s following in the footsteps of Comte, whose religion of humanity—maybe you might describe some of the outward trappings of it, because I find it incredibly creepy the way it institutionally reflects Catholicism in the saints and the sacramental system and so on.

**RAEDER:** Right, right. Well, Mill will reject all that. Mill grew up in a Protestant tradition. So he has no affinity for Comte’s ritualistic institutionalization. But the essence of it spoke directly to Mill’s deepest motivations. He converts, really. He recounts in these letters what can only be regarded as a conversion experience in 1841. He says, “I always saw in the idea of humanity the only idea capable of replacing that of God, but it is a long way from that to what I experience

today that the time is at hand.” His lifelong goal was to eliminate a theological or theistic orientation and redirect spiritual aspirations confined to the limits of this world. He is one of the many such thinkers of the 19th century who are attempting to create a social, secular, naturalistic or political religion to replace a theological orientation, which they regarded as moribund, obsolete, and corrupt. You have to put Mill in the context of a larger picture. In my field, there’s a huge literature discussing—I don’t if you’re familiar with the work of Eric Voegelin.

**WOODS:** Oh, sure.

**RAEDER:** My book is full of Voegelinian themes because I think Voegelin is the best on this issue of the crisis of modernity. We’re talking about the age of totalitarianism, the most barbaric century in history, the 20th century, and how did all of this emerge? And Voegelin says in the end it’s the result of a kind of spiritual pathology. He traces back even to the late Middle Ages, but this picks up militant steam in the 18th and 19th century, the attempt to obscure reality, the transcendent dimension of reality and confine all existence to this world, the mundane world. And so you see this in all kinds of thinkers in the late 18th and 19th centuries, starting with the French Revolution, and then, of course, there’s Hegel, and Comte, and Marx, and so forth, who are the drama of atheist humanism. God is dead, says Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century. This is the big news of modernity. Well, it’s well known about these other thinkers who are engaged in this process of truncating reality, so to speak. The only thing that exists is this world, and of course, what emerges, as Nietzsche says, is the new idol. When God is dead, man becomes God. Right? This is the great overarching theme of modernity, the great crisis of modernity. I think that’s Voegelin’s view. I think it’s correct.

And what I discovered in Mill is completely engaged in that same project. But that’s what was new about them, but people had not recognized that in Mill because no one had done anything on his private religious thought, but he was thoroughly committed to creating a secular, naturalistic, as he puts it, purely human religion without a God to replace the theistic and theological orientation traditional of Western civilization. And the argument is, and this is for people who are friends of liberty, is that the free society emerged only in Western civilization. It’s not coincidental. There’s something about the West, Western civilization, that is unique. That for some reason the quest for liberty emerged there and only there for individual liberty as we understand it, and if you do any research into this, you see that it is a product in some way of the biblical, Judeo-Christian inspiration, and liberty has always taken root and spread to societies that were somehow informed by that worldview. Well, all of our institutions, all of the institutions of freedom, and certainly in the American case, explicitly, are dependent implicitly upon something like the Judeo-Christian conception of existence and the nature of the individual person. None of it makes sense in the absence of those presuppositions, and therefore, this modern revolt against God, as Camus put it, is bound up with the crumbling of traditional constitutionalism with traditional, American understanding of the free society. And so we see this unraveling. Of course, the more virulent manifestations were the ideological

movements of the 20th century, but the same phenomenon has also affected Anglo-American society. We didn't have Stalin and Hitler and gulags and concentration camps, but we got the secular humanism, which is the modern-day name of the religion of humanity. We got Social Gospel, American progressivism, and all the rest of it, and we are seeing the gradual unraveling of our traditions, of the free society, and that's deeply bound up with this religious shift in modernity. It's not really a shift. It was pursued by militant activists who were determined to, as Bentham says, and want to eradicate even the very idea of religion from the minds of man. The whole idea that there is a law above the king, right? A higher law than government becomes increasingly obscure, and I think we are still witnessing the unravelling of this spiritual foundation of the free society, so that's why Mill becomes a—I grew to have such contempt for Mill because he is totally caught up in this process.

**WOODS:** Describe for us two things. What does the religion of humanity demand of me? And, secondly, is the religion of humanity like a religion in the senses in which we are accustomed to using that word? Does it have any outward trappings, or is it just a way of thinking?

**RAEDER:** Well, it doesn't have many outward trappings. Mill was not much for—you don't have to go to a particular. They used to have temples to humanity though up in New England at the end of 19th, early 20th century. This was all over. This was all out in the open at that time, and there were books. Let's see, there is an American author who wrote a book at the time called *Religion of Humanity*. This was in everybody's mouth. Here is the way to understand it. Anytime you think of God, just cross that out and replace what Comte called the great being of humanity. The source of existence, the end of all spiritual striving, the way to achieve spiritual fulfillment is not union with God, but it is instead union with the great being of humanity. Woodrow Wilson was a perfect disciple of this religion. Service to humanity, says Mill, is to become "the law of our lives." He sometimes calls the religion of humanity the religion of duty. What Mill is about is an intense socialization process where you get children, and he even says it's from infancy, and you train them up to believe that their spiritual fulfillment will be met in serving other people. This is, of course, absent any kind of larger transcendent orientation. He says, you want to make people such that they can't even conceive of any benefit to themselves that is not simultaneously shared by all others. This is the social ethic, socialism, the social religion. Comte coined the term altruism. "Live for others" was the slogan of the religion of humanity, right? There is a moral collectivism in Mill if you read *Utilitarianism*. This is why I am so stunned, actually, that people still continue to regard Mill as a friend of liberty. He says, "The utilitarian standard is not about the happiness of the individual, but the happiness of all concerned. The greatest happiness for the greatest number, and individuals may have to be sacrificed to that end." He's very clear about that. For Mill, liberty was a provisional value. I am sure you've read *On Liberty*.

**WOODS:** Yeah, a long time ago, but sure, I have.

**RAEDER:** Yeah, it's such a famous and evocative essay. I remember as a graduate student, you read this, and you love it, and what we'd do is we'd read into it our own passion for liberty, and

we feel Mill's passion. Well, it's a very passionate essay, but if you read Mill's other writings of the era, when he discusses the purpose of that essay, he understood that at his time in history he believed that it was essential to have the most radical liberty of discussion. That's really the essence of that book, and why? Because he believed that the only reason people still clung to Christianity was that it was a topic that was forbidden to be rationally criticized. It was against the law in England at that time. Christianity was regarded as part of the British constitution. It was considered blasphemous libel to criticize Christianity. So he is pushing as hard as he can against that convention, in order, he believed, that if Christianity was subjected to acid criticism, that it would just dissolve more quickly. And so he's authentically pushing for liberty in that essay, but he believes—then he goes on to say that this, as he picked up from Comte and all these other thinkers who accepted a philosophy of history that history has a goal and it's moving toward a final stage and all of that.

Well, of course, for Marx it was communism. For Comte and Mill, it was the final positive positivist or post-theological age that was in the offing, and that's coming up, and that's going to be unified by this Christianity is going to die, and there is going to be a new religious or spiritual ethos that is propagated from birth, and that's the religion of humanity. And Mill's utilitarianism is the moral arm of that religion. It's the new ethics, the new purely human ethics that's going to be created—not a theological morality, but created by the best and brightest human beings, right? Who are going to establish the new standards of morality. And everyone is going to be trained from infancy to absorb this new ethos, this new social, naturalistic, purely human ethos, and it's going to result in the final state, the positivist state. Mill conceives an end to history as Marx does, and so Mill starts worrying. He says, well, I guess we're going to get to this final state, and everybody is going to be unified by this commitment to humanity, but then he says he worries because he understands that he says, well, the true commitment requires struggle and contest, so we're going to have to create some institution like the devil's advocate to keep people's fervor alive for serving humanity in this final state, but there's not going to be liberty at that end. Everybody is going to subscribe to this new ethos, this new religious ethos. Mill is quite clear about it, and so anyway, I am going on.

**WOODS:** Well, let me ask you this. One of his complaints about Christianity is that it is a religion of rewards and punishments, and that means that you can't be engaged in purely selfless behavior—because if you're doing good, it's because you're trying to build up credit in heaven. But on the other hand, how can somebody raised in the Protestant tradition think that way about Christianity, when the whole point of Luther and Calvin was precisely to say Christianity is not a system of rewards and punishments?

**RAEDER:** Yeah, well, Mill actually knew very little about Christianity, and he never took the time to study or think about it. He was raised by his father. Let's not even go there—James Mill. It's hard not to feel sorry for Mill. James Mill was really a demon, and James Mill also had lost his faith early and became a committed atheist, as was Jeremy Bentham. People don't know this about Bentham: Bentham says that utilitarianism, Bentham's version, was consciously

constructed as an alternative religion. He says, I guess a new religion needs a new name; I propose utilitarianism. See Bentham had the exact same aspirations as Comte and the Mills, and actually even the substance of it was very similar. Bentham writes this essay, *An Analysis of the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*. Does religion contribute to man's temporal happiness? And of course, he concludes, no. So therefore it has to be dismissed, and utilitarianism is the new purely human standard to replace these theistic standards. James Mill was the great apostle of Bentham and he trained Mill up from birth. You know that story. You know Mill's autobiography, where poor Mill had to sit at his father's knees by the time he was one year old. His father trained him up. Mill was the new experiment in making new men, is the way James Mill put it.

He had been impressed by the thought of this 18th-century Frenchman Helvetius, who had this sort of Skinnerian rewards-and-punishment system. God is dead. Human nature is totally plastic. You can make up any kind of men you want. All you have to do is have control over the administration of rewards and punishments. You reward the behavior that you want, and you punish the behavior you don't. So John Stuart Mill was his father's first experiment at making new men. Although they intended to spread this out through legislation to society as a whole, and so Mill absorbed from his father the hatred of Christianity, and Mill says—it's kind of pathetic—he says in one place, in his late 30s, "My conscience always spoke to me in my father's voice." He never freed himself from that hegemony of his father over his mind. Mill was a pathetic figure in many ways, but every time I start feeling sorry for him, his overwhelming arrogance comes up, and it's impossible to sustain pity.

So Mill didn't really know anything about Christianity or really care. He was committed to this militant—it's all about—none of us will ever know for certain why in the 19th century this phenomenon rising to social significance where so many millions of people, that the thread of traditional faith snapped, and you instead see this militant drive for men to become God, to control the world, to define morality. They create the prisons of the 20th century. The ideological movements were driven by such secular messiahs all over the place, and Mill is one of them, sadly, and Mill was actually more effective in Anglo-American society than a Comte or Marx, who really spoke in an idiom alien to the Anglo-American tradition. But Mill knew the liberal tradition. He had grown up in the classics, so he was able to take that same symbolism and twist it and manipulate it in such a way to lead to the same end as those others but I think much more effective in Anglo-American society. America, like I said, didn't have gulags but we did get secular humanism and our version of the new idols.

**WOODS:** Well, the book is *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity*. We've been talking to Linder Rader. Linda, thanks so much for your time. Thanks for this very, very, interesting book. I hope you are able to make great progress on the magnum opus that you're working on now, in spite of having the heavy teaching load. We wish you all the best.

**RAEDER:** *Freedom in American Society* is the name of the new book, and it's a different approach. Tom, thank you again for thinking of me, and I have enjoyed so much talking to you.