

A (Not So) Secular Saint

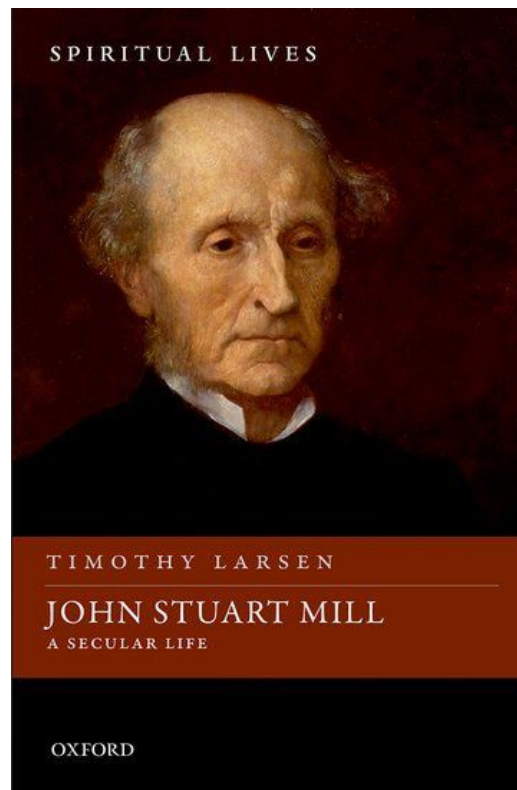
A new biography details the religious life of a liberal icon.

By James K. A. Smith • February 6, 2019

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life by Timothy Larsen. Oxford University Press. 256 pages.

TO BOTH HIS progressivist heirs and his conservative critics, John Stuart Mill is a secular saint, a priest of the triumphant modern moral order. Whether he is being celebrated or

vilified, the 19th-century philosopher is portrayed as a paragon of rational enlightenment who, paradoxically, inspires ardent devotion to the sacred autonomy of the individual.

The real story of this Victorian character turns out to be more complicated, and Timothy Larsen's brief new biography challenges such caricatures without devolving into polemics. One of the early volumes in Oxford University Press's *Spiritual Lives* series, this compact "secular life" neatly realizes the goal of the series: to explore the religious lives of figures not known for their religiosity, unearthing the secret spiritualities of those we tend to value for their so-called "secular" accomplishments.

In Mill's case, this turns out to be a counterpoint not only to his specific posthumous portrayal, but also a wider argument about the alleged incompatibility of liberalism and religion. Mill's legacy was effectively "edited" by his philosophical and political disciples, excising any hint of religious life. One would never know from the canon in our philosophy departments, for example, that Mill wrote an appreciative essay on "Theism." Nor would many realize that his closest friend at the end of his life was the Protestant pastor in Avignon who buried him with prayer. Nor would these heirs know what to do with the inscription on the tomb of his beloved Harriet Taylor that pines for "the hoped-for heaven."

The selective inheritance of Mill crammed him into a particular cultural mythology — one that proclaims political liberalism as the devotion we adopt when we've outgrown the backward pieties of religion. And this is a story told both by liberals and conservatives, who both seem to have a stake in a supposed antithesis between Christianity and liberalism. (Just scan the section on Mill in Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*.)

But if Larsen deconstructs this dichotomy, he also undercuts Mill's self-portrayal, proving his *Autobiography* to be an unreliable narrative. On both fronts, Larsen paints a secular saint who is decidedly less secular than we might have guessed.

Larsen's volume is less of a standalone biography and more like a focused supplement. He tends to assume the reader is already familiar with Mill's life, work, and subsequent influence, and then offers a reconsideration of the whole with a specific question in mind: was Mill as "secular" as we imagined or as a-religious as he portrayed himself? Larsen then pores over the entirety of Mill's corpus, along with the archive — a trove of intimate correspondence, 19th-century journalism and reviews, Mill's personal library — driven by this unique question, unasked by prior biographers who have waded through the same

materials. Imagine Larsen the historian comes to Mill's life equipped with one of those "secret code highlighters" we used to find in cereal boxes — the sort that would let us see words and pictures on the back of the box invisible to the naked eye. Larsen thus brings a religious eye (and ear) to the historical record, and the Mill that emerges is one we might not recognize.

Mill, Larsen shows us, "was the kind of 'secular' figure who read theological treatises appreciatively." For his entire adult life, when the introverted, isolated Mill gave himself over to relationships and friendships, they were often with devout individuals — the Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice, a treasured friend, for example, as were intimate circles of Quakers and Unitarians. (Larsen's aside here is apposite: "For some decades now too many scholars have had an unfortunate habit of treating nineteenth-century Unitarianism as if it were a way of being or becoming secular when, of course, it was actually a way of being or staying religious.") Mill's *A System of Logic* was published by the house now known as SPCK — the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge — and Mill was always delightfully surprised by how enthusiastically his books were received by religious leaders.

Most significantly, Larsen offers the first close reading of Mill's "Theism" essay that this philosopher has encountered — which says more about our philosophical curricula than it does about Mill. In this late text, published posthumously, Mill arrives at a position that philosophers today would call "probabilist theism." After assessing the evidence, Mill judged that there was "'a large balance of probability' in favour of there being a Creator." He would make similar conclusions about the immortality of the soul and the possibility of Christ as a revelation of God. And for those later disciples who are embarrassed by these claims, and apt to write them off as late lapses of Mill's rational acuity (or attributable to his devout stepdaughter, Helen Taylor), Larsen offers a comprehensive retrospective account of Mill's corpus and correspondence to unearth these sympathies across Mill's life, especially after breaking from the sectarian Utilitarianism of his imposing father. "This is Mill's final word on religion," Larsen concludes: "hopeful, imaginative, beneficial, probabilist theism." And its seeds were there all along.

Larsen humanizes the utilitarian robot of calculation, showing a growth and softening across Mill's lifetime, which manifests as an increased openness to transcendence, and Christ and Christianity in particular. One has to take the measure of a life here. Larsen delves into the crucial influence of Mill's father, James. Once a failed candidate for Presbyterian ministry, James Mill transferred his devotion to the Utilitarianism of Bentham.

As a result, he subjected young John to a cruel rationalist pedagogical experiment. Not only was the latter denied any religious formation, but he was also denied the opportunity to cultivate friendships lest their influence taint the experiment. It's when the adolescent John asserts his own agency and starts to make friends that we see not only a new openness but even a persistent attraction to friends shaped by religious devotion.

Thus Larsen frames the narrative with a theoretical hypothesis. The young Mill, he suggests, "had the spiritual equivalent to being tone deaf or colour blind." His capacity for what Larsen calls "a devotional sense" — "a way of fostering one's own identity and sense of self through one's loyalty and emotional connection to another entity" — was, early in his life, stunted and undeveloped. But here's another way that Harriet Taylor was so central to Mill's life. Not only was she his intellectual soulmate, but she also triggered something in Mill: his "relationship with Harriet Taylor is that it causes his sealed devotional sense dramatically and emphatically to burst forth and flow in torrents down this one tunnel of love." Unleashed, this aspect of Mill is opened — to love, to hope, to others, to an Other.

Mill's story, in that case, foreshadows the plot of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*: Harriet is the forerunner of a devotion in Mill that his own contemporaries described as "mystic." Charles Ryder's musing in *Brideshead* seems relevant: "[P]erhaps all our loves are merely hints and symbols; a hill of many invisible crests; doors that open as in a dream to reveal only a further stretch of carpet and another door." Perhaps love is the beginning of knowledge.

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