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# Classifying John Stuart Mill's Religious Beliefs – Was Mill a Religious Sceptic?

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to provide context in the effort to accurately classify the religious views of John Stuart Mill. The philosopher, not commonly known for his thoughts on religion, has nevertheless contributed to this topic with his three posthumously published essays, titled *Three Essays on Religion*, which have sparked some controversy and prompted various interpretations since they were first published in 1874. Mill's many interpreters have used differing terms in order to describe him in respect to his religious thinking. He has been described as a militant apostle, as an atheist, a theistic humanist, an agnostic, while Mill himself, in his writing, has provided an alternative, by speaking about religious scepticism as the most pertinent attitude for a rational thinker. Each of these terms is discussed separately in this paper, as the merits and suitability of using any of these terms is considered, with reference to the wider context of interpretative texts, Mill's own writings, and correspondences.

*Keywords:* philosophy, history of ideas, religion, John Stuart Mill, scepticism

## Classifying John Stuart Mill's Religious Beliefs – Was Mill a Religious Sceptic?

### Introduction

It is a little known fact, even amongst those who are familiar with the name John Stuart Mill, or even some of his work, that the philosopher had any religious belief at all. Indeed, as he writes in his autobiography "I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has not thrown off religious belief, but never had it" (Mill, 2009a, p. 43). As he is famous for his other writings, which, at least on the surface, have nothing to do with religion, he is seldom mentioned as an important contributor respecting this particular topic. Yet, even though he is not as known for it, he has devoted a significant amount of his thinking to the subject of religion, and some of these thoughts were posthumously published under the name *Three Essays on Religion* (Mill, 2009b). The essays reveal Mill's complex, ambivalent and comprehensive thinking on religion, that left some of his intellectual circle surprised, perplexed, and even "betrayed" (Sell, 2004, p. 148), just as much as it offended Christian theologians who deemed it an unpardonable heresy. At the very end of the third essay *Theism*, after an exhaustive and earnest scientific examination of the evidence in support of theism, Mill concludes that "the rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural, whether in natural or in revealed religion, is that of scepticism as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other" (Mill, 2009c, p. 207). If we were to make a safe inference from that, that when he alludes to a general "thinking mind", he includes himself in that; and provided we also assume that he is being truthful when he writes that, we can conclude that Mill thought of himself as a religious sceptic. There we could conclude the process of classification on the onset, and simply respect the designation Mill had chosen for himself. Some interpreters however, thought that there's more to it than meets the eye in this case. Unwilling to assume that Mill is being truthful, and what's more, thinking that even if he were truthful he is "deficient in self-knowledge,

certainly with respect to his religious convictions and aspirations" (Raeder, 2002, p. 11), Linda Raeder argues that it's best to understand Mill, not as modern secular humanist (as he is often, according to Raeder, mischaracterised), but as a "militant apostle of an intramundane social religion" (2002, p. 2). Others (Hamburger, 1999), similarly suspicious of Mill's intentions and less than convinced about his truthfulness, claimed that the most appropriate description of Mill's beliefs is that of "atheism" (1999, p. 55). Wilford N. Paul tried to coin a new term in his 1972 dissertation, that would best describe Mill's religious belief by calling it "theistic humanism" (Paul, 1972, p. 151). Finally, a number of authors (Ryan, 2016, p. 218; Courtney, 1889, p. 53; Carr, 1969, p. 491; Vernon, 2013, p. 167) have alluded to the term "agnosticism" as something pertinent to describe Mill's beliefs. With such a wide variety of conflicting accounts, it is perhaps worth giving attention to the claims and determining which of the mentioned terms (if any) are in fact applicable to John Stuart Mill, and what's the best way to classify him as a thinker on religion. Whether he is the secular thinker the way it's commonly understood, or if he should be described more precisely, or by another term altogether.

## **Religious founder and apostle**

If we are to take these claims in order of inaccuracy, we ought to start with Linda Raeder's contentions first. She claims that it's wrong to describe Mill as a secular thinker and that we are better off calling him a "militant apostle" of a "social religion" (Raeder, 2002, p. 2). Mill, claims Raeder, was prejudiced against religion (2002, p. 11), "obsessed" with it (2002, p. 66) and saw himself as a "religious founder" (2002, p. 6). Raeder does her utmost to paint Mill in a negative light, and such is the extent of her gripe with him, that she devotes a whole chapter to polemics with, because some of his writings "demand" (2002, p. 2) a critical response. It's a curious paradox, that even though her book is lengthy and well researched, none of the claims that were just listed are in accord with reality. The root of her error is a common one. It lies in thinking that, when Mill proposes a

“Religion of Humanity” he is using the word “religion” in a denotative sense of the term. The same mistake has spawned countless terminological chimeras. Some authors call it a “secular religion” (Vernon, 2013, p. 174; Hamburger, 1999, p. 108), others call it a “civic religion” (Daglier and Schneider, 2007, p. 584), or “godless religion” (2007, p. 587), or “metaphysical humanity” (Malachuk, 2010, p. 137), “naturalistic religion” (Matz, 2000, p. 137), and so on. Colin Heydt has been among the few writers who have pointed out this mistake, albeit rather timidly (in a single footnote).

For Mill, unlike for Comte, the Religion of Humanity has no institutional structure or associated ritual. This distances it further from traditional Christianity (not simply in the form of a doctrine, but as a set of practices) and from its status as a religion at all (rather than as an ethical ideal, which is how I think it should be understood). It is a religion, in other words, only in name (Heydt, 2006, p. 106).

This conclusion is corroborated by Mill’s own account. Mill introduces the term “Religion of Humanity” in his essay *Utility of Religion*. He gives his own definition of what the “essence” of religion is, and in Mill’s words it is “the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire” (Mill, 2009b, p. 130). This object however, is not a god, or gods. As he explains earlier “Belief, then, in the supernatural, great as are the services which it rendered in the early stages of human development, cannot be considered to be any longer required” (2009b, pp. 123-124). Instead of the supernatural, Mill points us towards the “idealization of our earthly life, the cultivation of a high conception of what it may be made” (2009b, p. 127). We should set our sight on the “ideal good, and the progress of the world towards it” (2009b, p. 135). The object that would ennoble our conduct and “exalt the feelings” for Mill is humanity. Having no element of a belief in god, no institutional structure, and no associated ritual, what Mill calls “Religion of Humanity” is not in fact a religion. Mill’s contemporary and ideological adversary James Fitzjames Stephen was quick to point this out as early

as 1874. " 'Love all mankind.' Influences are at work which at some remote time will make men love each other. These are respectively a piece of advice and a prophecy, but they are not religions" (Stephen, 1991, p. 243).

Mill was fully aware that he is not using the term religion in its denotative sense, and even admitted as much in his essay *Auguste Comte and Positivism*. After elaborating to an English audience for the first time<sup>1</sup> what a religion of humanity might entail, he stressed "When we say that M. Comte has erected his philosophy into a religion, the word religion must not be understood in its ordinary sense" (Mill, 1969, p. 332). From a contemporary perspective, the ordinary meaning of the term religion is the dictionary definition of it. Mill defined his own meaning, as philosophers often do, and this second meaning is from our perspective connotative. However, Mill thought his own meaning to be just as legitimate, and even superior to the ordinary meaning of the term. In a manuscript of a letter that he had sent to Arthur Helps in 1847 he writes "I do not believe that lofty character is in these times consistent with the utter prostration or indolence of intellect requisite for belief in the low puerilities which now usurp the name of religion" (Mill, 1963, p. 2001). In other words, he believed that what's commonly understood as religion usurps the name from a more worthy candidate, which is his own idiosyncratic meaning. Once we realize that when he writes „Religion of Humanity" he really means something much closer to what we might today call "secular humanism", and not religion, every satellite term such as "apostle" and "religious founder" should dissipate accordingly.

At least part of the reason why a number of authors have decided to ignore all this and continue to come up with new ways to describe Mill's supposed "religion" has to do with the fact that Mill borrows the term "religion of humanity" from Auguste Comte, who really did conceive something like a quasi-religion under that name. However, Mill has denounced Comte in *Auguste Comte and Positivism*

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<sup>1</sup> Even though *Utility of Religion* was completed in 1854, an English audience could not have read it until it was published in 1874.

in no uncertain terms. He described the ritualistic elements in Comte's system as "ludicrous" (Mill, 1969, p. 341), accused Comte of having a "mania for regulation" (1969, p. 343), and making the "same ethical mistake as the theory of Calvinism, that every act in life should be done for the glory of God, and that whatever is not a duty is a sin" (1969, p. 337). Mill was "appalled" by the way Comte proposed to use the authority of the high priest, describing it as "horrific" and "the most warning example we know, into what frightful aberrations a Powerful and comprehensive mind may be led by the exclusive following out of a single idea", saying that what was recommended to us by Comte is "subjugation and slavery" (1969, p. 351). As Mill himself has not laid out any kind of comprehensive system in his writings on religion, or proposed a ritual of any kind or advanced any notion of a clergy, or dogma, coupled with this most vehement rejection of Comte, it is important to understand that the two philosophers don't mean the same when they employ the term "religion of humanity". With that in mind, any notion of Mill as religious (in any sense of the term but his own) should wither away.

### **Was he a theist?**

An original approach in classifying Mill as a religious thinker came from Wilford N. Paul who argued that the spectrum of belief should be expanded so as to include an additional category, that of "theistic humanism" (Paul, 1972, p. 151) to which Mill belongs. "If we think of our hypothetical 'credence thermometer' having four divisions--atheism, agnosticism, hope and belief – Mill scores in hope" writes Paul, and in Paul's view hope is "desire with expectation" (1972, p. 154). He makes a distinction between hope (a mere wish) which constitutes only a possibility and "hope proper" (1972, p. 159), which belongs to the realm of probability and is based on evidence. Since Mill turned to examining the evidence in his essay *Theism*, and had even found evidence in support of a creator, his belief, his level of credence, is best described as theistic humanism. Paul admits, in a rather self-defeating admission that "Mill did not believe", but he "wanted to" (1972, p. 169). Based on

this desire to believe we should class him as a theist. There are at least two major objections to be raised against the claims that Wilford N. Paul makes. In the first, It's hard to understand how hope and desire, even if we grant that they are in Mill's case present, are relevant to the discussion about belief. Paul's postulates a hypothetical credence thermometer, which he himself fashioned for the purposes of his own argument, then asks, unironically "what more do we need to justify the conclusion that Mill is a theist?" (1972, p. 154). He treats hope as just another species of belief, and interpolates agnosticism into an ordinal scale of sorts, alongside atheism and hope, even though agnosticism pertains to scientific knowledge, and hope (even though it can sometimes be based on belief) isn't itself a type of belief. The second objection is that the hope of which Paul speaks cannot be attributed to Mill axiomatically. When Mill writes "the whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope" (Mill, 2009b, p. 208), it is not at all clear that he means to say that he himself is hopeful, or if he simply „allowed“ hopes as Alan Ryan puts it (Ryan, 2016, p. 247), to others.

### **Was he an agnostic?**

As already mentioned, a number of authors have opted to use the term "agnosticism" in relation to John Stuart Mill and his religious views. Various contemporary subdivisions of the term have emerged since it first appeared, including "weak" and "strong" agnosticism (Oppy, 1994, p. 147; Le Poidevin, 2010, p. 9), "temporal", "permanent", and "pragmatic" agnosticism (Lane, 2011, p. 213), "tentative" agnosticism (Barnes, 2003, p. 3) and so on, but the term's originator is Mill's contemporary, Thomas H. Huxley, who, by his own admission (Huxley, 1892, pp. 354–357) coined it in 1869, when he was a member of the Metaphysical society, which Mill refused (Mill, 1972d, p. 1583) to join. As Huxley didn't commit his coinage to print until much later<sup>2</sup>, and Mill never mentioned the term, either in his writings

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<sup>2</sup> Huxley's first published writing which contained the term agnosticism is his book *Hume* from 1878.

on religion or his letters, it is doubtful that Mill was cognisant of it. Huxley devised the term to counter and be antithetic to the "gnostic" of Church history who "professed to know much" (Huxley, 1892, p. 356) about the things he was much less sure of. As he explains "agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method", and the essence of that method lies in the application of a single principle, which is also the "axiom of modern science" (1892, p. 362). This principle, when expressed positively, is that "in matters of the intellect [you should] follow your reason as far as it will take you without regard to any other consideration", and when expressed negatively it is that in matters of the intellect one mustn't "pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable" (1892, p. 362). By demonstrable, Huxley means scientifically proven, as implied a couple of sentences later when he writes "that which is unproven to-day, may be proven by the help of new discoveries to-morrow" (1892, p. 363). He restated this definition more tersely to make "amends for any ambiguity" (1892, p. 457), in his essay *Agnosticism and Christianity*. As Huxley writes, the principle of agnosticism is that "it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justify that certainty", and, he adds "it is all that is essential to agnosticism" (1892, p. 450). Even though Huxley refers to both Hume and Kant as exemplary agnostics, he doesn't go as far as Kant in setting a ceiling to knowledge, by determining what can and cannot be known. The extent of the region of the uncertain will vary with each individual, but Huxley points out "I do not very much care to speak of anything as 'unknowable' " (1892, p. 451).

Knowing all this, the question is, whether John Stuart Mill was, according to Huxley's definition - an agnostic? The answer to this has to be a most resounding yes. Huxley could easily have listed him among the other two exemplars of agnosticism he cited. The scientific method underpinned Mill's entire philosophical enterprise. He was championing the principles of logic and the scientific method even in works that weren't directly related to it. His entire argument presented in *Theism* testifies to this fact, and even though he indulged in speculation on the

nature and the attributes of the divinity, he never expressed certainty of the kind Huxley was decrying. The only certainty Mill was willing to express in *Theism* was in regards to the example of the human eye. According to Mill, the parts of which the eye is composed must have been brought together by "some cause common to them all" (Mill, 2009b, p. 164). This, as Mill puts it is the "sum and substance of what Induction can do for Theism" (2009b, p.164). He is quick to add though, that this doesn't mean that this cause needs to be god, and mentions "the survival of the fittest" (2009b, p. 165) as another possible explanation that could be the common cause to eyes and sight. The only thing he is willing to say for certain is that there is a common cause. Mill steers clear of proclaiming certainty where he has no evidence that would warrant such certainty, and where there is no certainty he speaks of probability according to evidence. All this is completely in line with the agnostic method that Huxley has outlined. With that in mind, anyone who refers to Mill as an agnostic is not in error.

The only problem with agnosticism is that it's doesn't pertain to belief, but rather demonstrable scientific knowledge. It is an epistemic term. It only tells us how far someone is willing to go in stating his own certitude, but it doesn't tell us what someone believes or even what they don't believe. As George H. Smith argues, agnosticism is not a third alternative to theism and atheism. Theism and atheism refer to the presence or absence of belief in a god, while „agnosticism refers to the impossibility of knowledge with regard to a god or supernatural being. The term 'agnostic' does not, in itself, indicate whether or not one believes in a god. Agnosticism can be either theistic or atheistic" (Smith, 1979, pp. 10-11).

## **Was he an atheist?**

One person who did narrow Mill's religious view down with a more precise term is Joseph Hamburger. In his book *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and Control* Hamburger baldly states that in "In essays that were put aside for posthumous publication Mill did not conceal his atheism" (Hamburger, 1999, p. 55). Hamburger uses the term atheist

to refer to Mill throughout his book, but in his brief explanation for the suitability of the term, he appears somewhat hesitant. He writes that although the arguments in *Theism* typically were used by atheists "Mill's qualifications, avoidance of dogmatism, and measure of uncertainty at the end of the essay perhaps makes it inappropriate to label him an atheist, especially as he did not call himself one" (1999, p. 51). Furthermore, Hamburger even states that "If an atheist is defined as one who denies the existence of God, Mill cannot be called an atheist, for he made it clear that an atheist, by denying the existence of God, was dogmatic" (1999, p. 51). Despite all that, Hamburger justifies the suitability of the term by saying that "the aggressive, disdainful tone in 'Nature' and 'Utility of Religion' which he left unrevised, and the substantive arguments critical of theistic belief in 'Theism' allow one to say he went far beyond a tepid agnosticism" (1999, pp. 51). In support of the usage of the term, Hamburger also adds a citation from a letter that Mill had sent to Auguste Comte in which Mill says that he had a "rare fate of never having believed in God" (Haac 1995, p. 118). Another argument that Hamburger makes is that Mill „stopped short“ of the conclusion that theistic belief was "utterly groundless" as a "matter of tactics" (Hamburger, 1999, 51). This is one of Hamburger's very convincing arguments as he substantiates it with compelling evidence (1999, pp. 55–86) that Mill, throughout his life practiced concealment, evasion and equivocation in regards to his religious beliefs. Hamburger demonstrates, I think successfully, that Mill practiced a tactic of "blurring" (1999, p. 105) the anti-Christian theme in his writing in *On Liberty*, his famous essay, because the 19th century England was hostile to non-religious opinion, and as Hamburger says, Mill "certainly would have been justified in believing that freethinkers, agnostics, and atheists did not enjoy freedom of religious opinion" (1999, p. 85). The same tactic of being prudent that was used in writing *On Liberty* was again used in *Theism* where, Hamburger says, Mill was being "conciliatory as a matter of tactics" (1999, p. 141). In short, according to Hamburger Mill would have called theistic belief utterly groundless, but he was being conciliatory with his readers, so he didn't.

In the interest of precision, Hamburger's argument can be improved to make a better case in support of his usage of the term atheist. Hamburger says "If an atheist is defined as one who denies the existence of God" then we cannot call Mill an atheist. However, this definition is only appropriate and holds true for dogmatic denial. An important distinction needs to be made between negative atheism and positive atheism. Negative atheism is the "absence of belief in any god or Gods" (Martin, 2006, p. 2). Similarly, Antony Flew argues that negative atheism is an appropriate term for someone who is "simply not a theist", and not someone who "positively asserts the non-existence of God" (Flew, 1976, p. 14). For George Smith, atheism in general isn't a positive belief, "it doesn't assert the existence of anything", it is simply „absence of belief in god" (Smith, 1979, p. 15).

If we are aware of this distinction, one needn't deny the existence of god at all, as Hamburger thinks, to be qualified as an atheist. This is only requisite, if we were to call someone a *positive* atheist.

Oddly enough, even though much of contemporary commentary on the beliefs of various philosophers is seemingly oblivious to this distinction, Mill was well ahead of his time and acknowledged it<sup>3</sup>. Although Mill recognises the distinction, his understanding of what negative atheism means<sup>4</sup> is different to the ones cited before. To his mind, negative atheism means thinking that there isn't any evidence on either side. This further means that, because Mill had found evidence for the existence of a creator in the marks of nature, he cannot justify calling his beliefs atheism, and instead opts for religious scepticism.

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<sup>3</sup> Mill distinguished his own position of scepticism from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other "including, in the present case, under atheism, the negative as well as the positive form of disbelief in a God, viz., not only the dogmatic denial of his existence, but the denial that there is any evidence on either side" (Mill, 2009b, p. 207).

<sup>4</sup> Mill agrees with contemporary writers on what positive atheism is.

## Conclusion

We have now reached an interpretative crossroads that leads to several different conclusions.

Firstly, we could simply classify Mill according to a contemporary definition. If we take negative atheism to mean absence of belief in a god or gods, Mill would qualify as a negative atheist, for he is explicit that the evidence he presents in Theism is "insufficient for proof" (2009b, p 207.) and that "the whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief" (2009b, p. 208). Or, in other words, Mill does not believe. It can be said, on that account that Joseph Hamburger is right in using the term, but for wrong reasons.

Alternatively, we could consider Mill's own definition. If we are being cynical, we could say that he is hiding under the guise of scepticism because it's a less contentious term than atheism, and he is simply, in Hamburger's terms, using tactics to avoid condemnation.

Lastly, we could extend the benefit of the doubt to Mill, and accept his own nomenclature as accurate enough. This, with one important caveat though. Mill states that the reason for deciding that scepticism is the correct attitude, rather than atheism or theism, is that there is evidence. This evidence, which he presents in Theism, however, is something Mill must have found at a much later date compared to his earlier writings. In *Utility of Religion* which was completed<sup>5</sup> in April of 1854, Mill writes that there is only one<sup>6</sup> form of belief in the supernatural that „stands wholly clear both of intellectual contradiction and of moral obliquity" (Mill, 2009b, p. 134). However, even though the moral tendency of this belief is for Mill unquestionable, he doesn't think there is much evidence for it. He says "the evidence for it, indeed if evidence it can be called is too shadowy and unsubstantial, and the

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<sup>5</sup> We know this from a letter (Mill, 1972a, p. 195) that Mill had sent to Harriet Taylor.

<sup>6</sup> This belief is that which, having rejected, the idea of an omnipotent creator, views Nature and Life as "the product of a struggle between contriving goodness and an intractable material, as was believed by Plato, or a Principle of Evil, as was the doctrine of the Manicheans" (Mill, 2009b, p. 134).

promises it holds out too distant and uncertain" (2009b, p. 135). This belief, according to Mill can be held "in conjunction" with the belief in the religion of humanity, even though it might seem like a belief "not grounded on evidence" (2009, p. 135). It would appear that Mill, at this point in time, had not found any evidence for the limited creator that he would later argue for in *Theism*. The essay *Theism* was written in the winter of 1869 (Packe 1954, 442), but we don't know for certain, *at which point* during the inetrmediate period from 1854(when he didn't have any evidence to offer) to 1869 (when he wrote down the evidence in question), did Mill actually acquire the evidence. Several letters help in this regard. In September of 1860 Mill had sent a letter to Florence Nightingale in which he discussed theology with her. In it he writes "I confess that no religious theory seems to me consistent with the facts of the universe, except (in some form or other) the old one of the two principles " (Mill 1972b, 709). He continues by saying that "there are many signs, in the structure of the universe, of an intelligent Power wishing well to man and other sentient creatures", but then points out that he could also show "not so many perhaps, but quite as decided indications of an intelligent Power or Powers with the contrary propensity" (Ibid). In the same letter, he writes "I tried what I could do with that hypothesis<sup>7</sup> many years ago", which shows that Mill had grappled with this subject for the longest time. He uses the words "signs" and "indications" and doesn't yet speak of evidence. However, by 1866 this will have changed. In August of that year Mill had sent a letter to Robert Pharazyn, in which he mentions the appearances of contrivance in the universe, saying that a benevolent mind is something that "leans in the direction in which the evidence, though I cannot think it conclusive, nevertheless points" (Mill 1972c, 1195). Here, Mill's argument that we can read in his later work *Theism* seems to be already formulated, and he is at this point talking about evidence. These two letters help us to roughly estimate the moment at which Mill

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<sup>7</sup> The hypothesis as stated by Mill is "that a Perfect Being could do everything except make another perfect being—that the next thing to it was to make a perfectible one—and that perfection could only be achieved by a struggle against evil" (Mill 1972b, 709).

discovered evidence. We can only speculate, but regardless of what we decide on this point, it would seem, that for the longest period of his life (in 1854 Mill was 48), Mill was a negative atheist, even by his own definition of that term. This is something that's worth keeping in mind for an intellectual historian.

Whether the discovery of evidence in the later part of his life, warrants a change in the description of his belief remains the only point of uncertainty. Whether "sceptic" denotes a qualitatively different concept than "negative atheist" as Mill had argued, or if it's a distinction without a difference, which has the sole merit of obscuring a writer from vehemence and revulsion, an indication of no more than the use of "tactics", to borrow a term from Joseph Hamburger.

Whichever way we decide to resolve this uncertainty, it cannot be said that the use of either "agnostic", "negative atheist" or "sceptic" or even "non believer", "freethinker" or "secularist" is grossly inaccurate. The same may not be said of those who use terms like "theist" or "apostle", which are inapplicable to Mill and should be avoided, for all future references.

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## **Klasifikovanje religijskih uverenja Džona Stjuarta Mila – Da li je Mil bio religijski skeptik?**

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### **Sažetak**

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da pruži kontekst u nastojanju da tačno klasifikuje religijske stavove Džona Stjuarta Mila. Filozof, koji nije široko poznat po svojim razmišljanjima o religiji, ipak je doprineo ovoj temi sa svoja tri posthumno objavljena eseja pod nazivom "Tri eseja o religiji". Ovi eseji, objavljeni prvi put 1874. godine, izazvali su kontroverze i podstakli različite interpretacije od tada. Mnogi tumači Mila koristili su različite termine kako bi ga opisali u pogledu njegovog religijskog razmišljanja. Opisan je kao militantni apostol, kao ateista, teistički humanista, agnostik, dok je sam Mil u svojim spisima ponudio alternativu, govoreći o religijskom skepticizmu kao najprikladnijem stavu za racionalnog mislioca. Svaki od ovih termina se posebno razmatra u ovom radu, uz razmatranje zasluga i prikladnosti korišćenja bilo kog od ovih termina, uz osvrt na širi kontekst interpretativnih tekstova, Milove vlastite spise i korespondencije.

*Ključne reči:* filozofija, istorija ideja, religija, Džon Stjuart Mil, skepticizam