

Review of: Alan P F Sell, *Mill on God: The Pervasiveness and Elusiveness of Mill's Religious Thought*

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Alan P F Sell, *Mill on God: The Pervasiveness and Elusiveness of Mill's Religious Thought*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, £15.99, pp. 210, ISBN: 0754616665, reviewed by Daniel von Wachter

The English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is known for his defence of utilitarianism, of empiricism, and of freedom of opinion. In this book, however, Alan Sell investigates Mill's thought on religion and his disputes about religion with contemporaries. Throughout his life Mill criticised Christianity. He was not one of those, like Immanuel Kant, who were brought up in a Christian environment and then scornfully turned against it. Mill writes himself: 'I am ... one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it.'

Sell demonstrates that often Mill was not very careful to understand properly the Christian doctrines that he criticises. For example, Mill accuses Christian morality of mainly forbidding things instead of promoting the good, and of motivating a virtuous life by the hope of heaven and the threat of hell. Sell points out that Mill ignores how much Christian morality emphasises that the good should be pursued for its own sake.

However, in general Mill is a powerful advocate not only of freedom of thought, for which he campaigns in his book *On Liberty*, but also of balanced search for truth. It is his declared policy that it is 'a more healthful exercise of the mind to employ itself in learning from an enemy, than in inveighing against him'.

Mill's strongest objection against the existence of the Christian God is that a perfectly good, wise and powerful God would not create a world with physical and moral evil. In order to explain why there is evil in the world he speculates that the world may be 'a battlefield between a good and a bad power'. However, more prevalent than this speculation in Mill's thought about religion is his aim to substitute the old religions like Christianity by a new religion without God, the Religion of Humanity, which Sell discusses thoroughly. Its creed was the utilitarian one, that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote pleasure.

Alan Sell's criticism of Mill is always fair and sensible. But his main aim is not to criticise Mill in depth but to collect Mill's thoughts on religion, which are scattered in his writings, and put them together into a whole that is as coherent as possible. Above that he presents analyses, sometimes very detailed ones with many quotations from Mill's contemporaries, of the debates about religion in which Mill was involved.