



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Steven Rockefeller**

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## Steven Rockefeller

**BILL MOYERS:** *[voice-over]* The American roots of Steven Rockefeller's family tree run back to the tycoon and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, founder of one of the country's first great fortunes. But the first Rockefeller would very likely be surprised by the path his great-grandson has taken in his own intellectual and spiritual journey.

Steven Rockefeller has steeped himself in the writings of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the philosopher John Dewey, and along the way he has become a Buddhist. For almost 20 years, Steven Rockefeller has been teaching in the religion department at Middlebury College in Vermont. He is currently writing a book about John Dewey, and working on what he calls "the democratic reconstruction of religion."

It was his recent speech, delivered at Cambridge University in England, that caught my attention. It was titled "Democracy as Spiritual Practice."

*[Interviewing]* Walt Whitman talked about America as a "sublime and serious religious democracy." What do you think he meant by that, "religious democracy?"

**STEVEN ROCKEFELLER:** Well, Whitman believed that America was, at its core, a spiritual democracy in the sense that it had faith in the common people, that it had an Emersonian faith in the capacities of the individual, and also a sense of the beauty and wonder of the whole natural world. And for Whitman, the objective was to encourage men and women to realize their distinctive capacities at all levels of society. And to do this, and to create a culture in which people are genuinely set free, and are able to realize and express themselves, gives to the democratic life a kind of religious depth and meaning.

**MOYERS:** Do you think America is a religious democracy?

**ROCKEFELLER:** I don't think it is today, and I think that Whitman had a vision and Dewey had a vision—John Dewey once said that modern civilization—and he's talking about modern western civilization—stands or falls with the capacity of the individual to be its bearer. Now, I think this is the issue in a nutshell. If we're going to have a free world, we've got to create schools and again, social organizations, that develop in people the intellectual and the emotional and the spiritual capacities to be independent, moral beings. Autonomous moral beings. And so that the objective is an autonomous individual who also is willing to develop his or her capacities by using those capacities in service of the community.

**MOYERS:** Because there can not really be, can there, a fulfilled self without a tie to society, without a pla—what was it Jane Addams said, Jane Addams who founded Hull House, that wonderful passage in one of her writings where she talks about the democratic way possessing the life-giving power to create in us a sense of the whole, but not at the sacrifice of the self? A wonderful tension there.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes, a sense of belonging to the whole comes through.

**MOYERS:** Belonging to the whole, that's it.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes, comes with leading the democratic life. And in my own life, in my own spiritual quest and search, I've finally come to the conclusion that the real heart of the issue has to do with the quality of one's relationships

with other people and with all the different dimensions of reality that we have to deal with, whether we're talking about animals and trees and plants, or whatnot. And that the important issue is the realization, if you will, of the divine in and through one's relationship with others. And when I talk about, therefore, spiritual democracy, it has, in my mind, a real spiritual depth. That there is the possibility within a democratic culture of creating a society that frees people to pursue this kind of spiritual realization in and through relationships.

**MOYERS:** You mentioned your own spiritual journey. Tell me a little bit about it. You were reared by your parents in the Christian tradition.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Mm-hmm. Yes, I was raised in the Baptist and Protestant tradition, and early on in my life I developed a deep religious interest. And that religious interest led me to take lots of courses at college in religion, but I didn't think that it was appropriate for me to major in religion or philosophy, but I studied it very intensely. And after a couple of years out of college, I was in the Army, a bit in politics and business, I was reading Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr during my lunch hour. And I finally decided that if I was going to get into this, I'd better just stop and give my full attention to it, and that if I didn't, at the end of my life I would regret it deeply. And I thought I would go and study it up and get the answers and come back and go into politics or something. Well, of course, it was much more complicated.

But this led me to go to theological seminary, and I went through a long odyssey. And initially I tried to find these answers, basically, through intellectual analysis, through theology and philosophy. And I found increasingly that religion is not something that can be acquired through the head.

**MOYERS:** The intellect had not been enough for you?

**ROCKEFELLER:** That is correct.

**MOYERS:** I mean, you studied for years intellectually, but still something missing?

**ROCKEFELLER:** Was missing. And in Union Seminary in those days, people discouraged one from pursuing mysticism—I mean, people said, "Well, you know, this is an interesting subject, but not worthy of a term paper, or something of this nature. And there was an impulse in me in that direction. It was a side of my nature that wanted to find expression, and it wasn't until some years after I graduated from Union Seminary I found what I was looking for. And I found a book by Philip Kaplan, called *The Three Pillars of Zen*, introduced by Houston Smith. And there was instruction in meditation. And so I turned to the Zen tradition. And I had searched within the Christian tradition to find somebody who could help me in this regard, and I couldn't find anybody that seemed right for me. And I was also troubled by the dualism between God and the world that is involved in Christian theism.

**MOYERS:** The dualism?

**ROCKEFELLER:** The separation of God and the world, God and myself. There was a sense of remoteness and isolation, if you will. So I turned to Zen, and the core of Zen is an intense spiritual quest to see into the truth of yourself and the truth of reality. This is the core of Zen training and Zen spirit, is to see deeply into your true self and into the nature of reality.

**MOYERS:** And how does one do that? How did you do it, rather?

**ROCKEFELLER:** Well, the basic Zen practice is sitting meditation. And there are various forms of this. And after you go through a certain basic initial period of regular meditation, which involves concentrating the mind, you are given koans to work on, which are puzzles. Each of them is a spiritual puzzle that can-

not be resolved by the intellect alone, so that in part, they are intended to jam the intellect and to engage your whole personality so that, if you will, you see the truth, or you come to encounter the truth, on that deeper level which, in the Bible, I would say, is called the heart. On the level of the heart, the mind, the will and the emotions are all integrated, and therefore there is a sense of wholeness and unity that comes into play.

**MOYERS:** You said the truth, that you experience the truth. The truth of what?

**ROCKEFELLER:** Well, the truth—let me give you a short poem of a great Zen teacher, Dogen. Dogen—

**MOYERS:** Master Dogen.

**ROCKEFELLER:** He is the Thomas Aquinas, if you will, of the Japanese Zen tradition, all right, he's a 13th century master, he's almost a contemporary of St. Francis of Assisi. And Dogen has some lines that run like this: "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things. To be enlightened by the ten thousand things is to free your body and mind, and those of others."

Now, what does it mean to be enlightened? Well, first of all, you emphasize "forget the self." This is a common teaching in much Christian practice, right, to forget the self, to be able to lose yourself in your relationships with others, with other beings, in the broad sense. To be enlightened by the ten thousand things, what does Dogen mean by that? He meant something not unlike to what St. Francis meant when he said that brother sun and sister moon and animals and earth, air, fire and water all reveal the glory of God. And that if you are awake to this divine presence in the world, then God is, in a sense, all about you. And there is no separation of yourself from God. St. Francis was very concerned about trying to break down that dualism of God and the individual.

The important thing is that when one experiences it, there arises deep in the heart the fundamental core of religious faith, which is the great yes to life, in spite of everything that would lead us to say no. It is the affirmation of life which gives one a sense of belonging to the world, a sense of inner peace, and a sense of courage.

**MOYERS:** And did you find what, as a very young man, you had set out in the great libraries and theological treatises, did you find what you thought you were looking for?

**ROCKEFELLER:** I've gone a long way down the road, Bill, and the way I see myself is that I am just beginning to wake up, and I find that I am helped in many ways, by teachers, by students, by friends, by enemies, and by rocks and trees and flowers.

**MOYERS:** By rocks and trees and flowers. Now, I think of democracy as involving persons, I think of religion as involving human beings and the heart, but of rocks and things and flowers, how do they fit into this scheme of things?

**ROCKEFELLER:** Well, what I would want to argue is that our sense of democratic community today has to be expanded, so that it embraces and includes the whole biosphere, that we have to think of ourselves as being a part of this larger community, being in a way that we never have before. And I am convinced that only when our notions of moral democracy are integrated with a sense of environmental ethics and a sense of the intrinsic value that exists in the natural world, quite apart from what its utility is for the human being, will we find the kind of integration and wholeness as people and the kind of health and well-being as a society that we're searching for.

**MOYERS:** But we have such a hard time extending the idea of rights to other

human beings, to people who are different from us, to people who don't speak the same language, to people who disagree with us politically. It seems almost an impossibility, if not an absurdity, to try to extend it to the rest of the living world, to the animals and the plants and the other forms of life.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Well, I think there are two issues involved here. I mean, one is the very survival of human society in a biosphere that has been seriously damaged and which presents us with enormous problems. And if we don't change the way we are relating to this whole world, the consequences for human life are going to be disastrous. And there is a practical issue here, from a selfish human point of view, that if we don't change our way of relating to the natural world, we may not survive. But there is a deeper spiritual issue here which has to do with this sense of community with the whole world of nature. Someone like Buber profoundly understood this, and I think that one of the great challenges to religion today is to become more articulate about the relationship between the human and the nonhuman world.

Again, one of the appeals of Buddhism to me is that Buddhism has had a sensitivity on this frontier from very, very early. One of the basic vows that one takes in the Zen tradition goes like this: "All beings without number I vow to liberate." "All beings without number I vow to liberate."

**MOYERS:** Without number?

**ROCKEFELLER:** Without number. In other words, a bodhisattva, in the Buddhist tradition, is somebody who makes a commitment to work for the liberation of all beings throughout the universe, for however many lifetimes it should take.

**MOYERS:** This was quite a journey, quite a quest for you, I mean, a Rockefeller, conspicuous American family, Protestant family, powerful family, to go into what, to many people, to many Americans, would appear to be an exotic religion, certainly exotic in terms of the American tradition, a tradition that seems to many people not of this world, the Buddhist idea. Is that a stereotype, that the Buddhist is not of this world?

**MOYERS:** It is a common criticism of Buddhism, that it is not—that it does not have a social ethic comparable to that of Christianity, and that it has been otherworldly in its orientation, with a heavy emphasis on monastic withdrawal. There is an important point that one can make about other-worldliness. There is one kind of other-worldliness which is very misleading, because it takes your attention away from this world and all the Marxist criticism of religion in that regard is rather valid, insofar as it leads people to look outside this world and turn attention away from this world, and to neglect their everyday relations.

**MOYERS:** No justice now, justice later.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes, exactly. But there is a very important meaning in a certain kind of other-worldliness that Jesus expressed when he said, "Be in the world, but not of it." Now, what does it mean to be in the world, but not of it? To be not of it is to give up those illusions, those rationalizations, those prejudices, those attachments which distort our relationship to the world. So, if you will, the objective is to be an individual at one with the world, to be a person who is free from, again, illusions and prejudices that prevent ourselves from encountering the world as it really is. And so that, then, that kind of other-worldliness has a certain function. In other words, one sometimes has to withdraw in order to enter more fully into the world.

And in the Zen tradition there is a teaching that "Nirvana is samsara." Now, what does this mean? Nirvana you could interpret simply as the kingdom of

heaven, if you will, to use a western analogy, spiritual liberation. And samsara is the everyday world that we live in. And the deepest teaching, in what is called the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, is the teaching that there is no dualism between nirvana and samsara, and that a truly enlightened person discovers the truth in his or her everyday life.

Now, this is what I think is the critical issue, and what a democratic social world opens up is the possibility of realizing this identity of the religious in the everyday, which is exactly what Buber's concern was.

**MOYERS:** And Jesus, who said at one instance, he said, "The kingdom of God is all around you. You don't see it." There's something of that, that it's right there at this very moment.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes. Let me say a word about this, because may people turn to religion to find wholeness, to find inner peace, to find a sense of belonging, if you will, with God or the larger universe. One cannot find this as an isolated self, and the mistake made, I think, by many people in the midst of their religious quest is that they think by just doing meditation or by seeking a god outside the world, they will somehow find this wholeness. But we as selves are intimately related with the world of which we are a part, and we can only find psychic wholeness when we find a relationship with the larger world, when we integrate, if you will, this quest for wholeness with our everyday social life.

So part of what's at issue here in this what I would call democratic reconstruction of the religions, is an attempt to break down this separation of the religious and social life, which will open the door to people finding a kind of wholeness that now eludes us.

**MOYERS:** Well, I keep coming back to Martin Buber, the great Jewish seer, who believed that the eternal Thou, what you might call God and I might call God, is encountered in everyday life, and through relationships to persons, insofar as we think of those persons as Thou and not it, as a human being, and not an object.

**ROCKEFELLER:** That is correct.

**MOYERS:** But I find that at the heart of all great religions.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes. I believe, you see, that the democratic idea is at least, in seed, in all the traditions. I think that the way to look at it this way, in some ways, that all of these religions originally were intimately related to a particular society at a particular place and time on this planet. What has happened is that society has outgrown these religions, and we've now created a world community. The religions are all rooted in particular communities, with particular histories.

**MOYERS:** Beirut. Belfast.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes, yes, Yes.

**MOYERS:** That's where the reality is.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes. But the world society that is emerging is bigger than these communities with which these religions originally identified themselves. So for people who are part of these religions, they're caught in a bind. They now are part of a world community, but their religion is tied to a more narrow community. The only way you can reconcile this tension between their being members of a global community and their being tied to a local religious tradition is for there to be a democratic evolution of these different religious traditions, and the way I would put it is that there can be many different pathways into the common democratic life.

But let me put it this way. Bill. The greatest single moral failing of many reli-

gious traditions is their inability to teach their followers to respect people of a different tradition the same way they respect the people of their own tradition. And some people have tied this to the theistic concept of God, because if God is separate from the world, and a being on whom your salvation is dependent, and God's will is expressed in a certain set of laws and doctrines, then those people who do not adhere to these laws and doctrines are your enemy, because they, in a sense, would lure you away from the source of your salvation. And you relate to those other people in and through your relationship to this being, God, who is outside the world.

Now, if you give up that concept of God, this monarchical, patriarchal concept of God, and think of your relationship with people as direct, as Buber would have you conceive of it, and think of relating to God in and through your relationship to people, all kinds of people, then this problem begins to dissolve.

**MOYERS:** It's a very exciting time for religious inquiry today. When you look at what's happening in Eastern Europe, you discover that, while the Communists tried to eliminate religion, the spiritual life, from the affairs of state, they could not do so.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** You get an outburst there of religious sentiment behind the toppling of the Communist empire. The mixture of the research and insights that feminists are bringing to the notion and image of God—

**ROCKEFELLER:** Mm, mm, mm.

**MOYERS:**—the arrival in this country, embodied in people like you, of a very swift-running current from Buddhism, there's something very exciting going on in our times as the '90s begin.

**ROCKEFELLER:** I think that there clearly is. And when I think about the struggles in Eastern Europe, I cannot help think about Dostoevsky's parable in *The Brothers Karamazov* about the Grand Inquisitor and his encounter with the figure of Christ. And the Grand Inquisitor has a very negative view of human nature, and the Christ a more optimistic one. The Grand Inquisitor believes that human beings are basically like a bunch of unruly schoolboys who, if they're given some freedom, will make a terrible mess out of things, and then, realizing they can't control themselves, will return and submit themselves again to authority. And he adds that, in addition, the average human being doesn't want to have to keep his or her conscience, it's too much work and the anxiety that goes with having to make decisions is too much, and again, they would submit themselves. The Christ figure in this story, on the other hand, believes firmly that the meaning of human existence is linked with the realization of freedom, and that freedom is perfected in faith. And even though with the realization of freedom go tremendous risks, and often it's abused and misused, it is ultimately humanity's destiny to wrestle with freedom and try to find its way to faith.

Now, what I see happening in Eastern Europe is—even though Dostoevsky himself predicted that the future of history was with the Grand Inquisitor, the people really couldn't deal with freedom, and that democracy and all of this would ultimately fail. Now, the democratic vision is very different. It is a vision that has faith in the common person, like Dostoevsky's Christ, a vision that believes that there is—recognizes there is great risk in freedom, but it is worth with this search for freedom and its perfection and realization.

So one can say, as one looks at Eastern Europe today, that there is, again, a great experiment going on as to whether Eastern Europe can deal with freedom,

surmount the ethnic rivalries, the religious conflicts and the nationalism that is liable to make this experiment in democracy impossible.

**MOYERS:** You are talking about a society, democratic society, that goes beyond simply the ongoing progress of material goods. You're talking about something quite different from that—

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes, yes.

**MOYERS:** —basically liberal tradition.

**ROCKEFELLER:** Yes. Well, I think, at its best, the liberal tradition has been more than economic democracy and political democracy. I mean, you have voices like Emerson, Whitman and Dewey which have— and Martin Luther King, who have had a vision, that at the core of a really healthy democracy there has to be a spiritual democracy. And I think that the real challenge of history is creating a social organism where all the institutions are— have a liberating effect on the people within them. And this is a challenge that human culture has only just begun to wrestle with.

And my point about the world religions is that all of them should identify with this task, that all of them should see the meaning of the religious life is in creating this social order, call it the kingdom of God, call it the identity of nirvana and samsara, whatever. Call it developing in people the capacity for I-Thou relation. This challenge is where the religious life I believe should come to focus.

**MOYERS:** [voice-over] From Middlebury, Vermont, this has been a conversation with Steven Rockefeller. I'm Bill Moyers.

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