What Hath Happened to "The War-Prayer?"

Ron POWERS

"What will it take for evangelicals in the United States to recognize our mistaken loyalty? We have increasingly isolated ourselves from the shared faith of the global Church, and there is no denying that our Faustian bargain for access and power has undermined the credibility of our moral and evangelistic witness in the world."

Thus ran a query posed by an evangelical professor of religion early in 2006.[1] The "mistaken loyalty" at issue was that of the writer's brethren—the 87 percent of all American evangelical ministers who had thrown their influence and Christian authority behind the president and his advisers in their prosecution of the Iraq war.

The professor's anguish was palpable, yet respectfully phrased; his moral outrage unmistakable, yet constrained by the rules of "polite" discourse. "Many of the most respected voices in American evangelical circles blessed the president's war plans," he went on to remonstrate—reasonably, decorously—"even when doing so required them to recast Christian doctrine."

A hotter voice lay available, of course, in the archives from a hundred years past as a model for the dissenting churchman's diction: a rawer, more headlong voice, a voice less concerned with comity. A voice more than capable of humbling the reductive, punitive assertion that stains the vast dark side of current American polemics—such as the assertion of a famous televangelist that "God is pro-war."

"I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God!" thunders the counter-voice. And it proceeds to beggar both the ingratiating timidity, on the one hand, and the pre-emptive and empty bluster, on the other, of today's enfeebled debate:

"O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle. . .we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. . . O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells. . . help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst. . . ."

These fragments from the heart of Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer"—the "unspoken part" of the pious minister's prayer for victory made unbearably manifest by the Stranger—contain what is all but missing from contemporary discourse in matters of war, and public policy, the moral destiny of the nation. The sentences are lean, accelerated, cadenced, and charged with imagery. The premise on which their authority depends—in this case, that official and religious cant conceal seeds of their abominable corollaries —is self-evident and irrefutable. They burn like acid through the layers of received wisdom, partisan pleading, and distilled, industrialized non-language that have sabotaged critical thinking—"Support Our Troops" being the supreme, and ubiquitous, soporific.

"The War-Prayer" fully illustrates William Dean Howells's shrewd analysis of what made Mark Twain's diction transformative, even transcendent of its "period": its "bottom of fury," its "indignant sense of right and wrong," "its "ardent hate of meanness and injustice." These worthy passions propelled by "his single-minded use of words, which. . . express the plain, straight meaning their common acceptance has given them. . . He writes English as if it were a primitive and not a derivative language, without Gothic or Latin or Greek behind it." Or focus-groups, or marketing, or Rove.

In short: "The War-Prayer," taken in sum with Mark Twain's other polemic essays of the 1900s, form the Rosetta Stone of dissent from American imperialist folly.

So what has happened to it?

Or to frame the question as a new (and still generally "unspoken") prayer: "O Lord

our Father—where is thy Stranger with his 'War-Prayer' today? In these our own times of thundering guns and hurricanes of fire and roofless children—the fresh bounties of a God-chosen nation once again explaining its Christian righteousness to the unoffending widows sitting in the darkness of another distant land—whence cometh the fire of thy countervailing talking points?"

"O Lord—what giveth?"

The Lord's answer might well be along the lines of, "that dependeth on what your definition of 'happened' is." The piece enjoys incomparably broader cachet today than in Mark Twain's lifetime, when it enjoyed none at all—owing to that famous rejection in 1905 by the *Harper's Bazaar* editor Elizabeth Jordan, out of marketing concerns: she feared that the sketch would offend her female demographic. Published in bowdlerized form in 1923, it received no real attention until the Vietnam era, when war protestors read it aloud in coffee-house protests and mailed it around to one another.

Its re-branding as a kind of pop-cultural museum piece, or gift-shop item, kicked in after that. In 1983, it was tacked, like an amendment rider, onto a PBS adaptation of "A Private History of a Campaign That Failed." Its world premiere as an oratorio took place at the Ulster Choral Society in Kingston, New York, in April 1995, and people came from near. The previous year, it had provided the title of an episode of the science-fiction series "Babylon 5," although Mark Twain's story-line was "tweaked" somewhat: in it, Susan discovers that her ex-lover Malcolm is a member of the Homeguard, a pro-Earth terrorist group; assassination and galactic intermarriage, elements unstressed in the 1905 script, are teased up a little. In the years following America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, "The War-Prayer" has ricocheted through cyberspace, as facile a virtual bumper-sticker for the anti-war Left as are "Freedom is on the march" and "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity" for the pro-war Right.

All well and good; except that in its very ascension to status as Cultural Treasure, "The War-Prayer"—paralleling the frequent plight of its author—has somehow shed its subversive power as a model for public thought and argumentation.

To be sure, America has hardly lacked for post-Twainian dissenting eloquence: from voices as diverse as John Dos Passos, Mother Jones, Martin Luther King, Woody Guthrie, Adrienne Rich, Bob Dylan, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Frank Rich, Mollie Ivins, a thousand others. None of these, for all their value (save perhaps for Dr. King, who had his enemies), has equaled Mark Twain's universal renown, combined with his unique bottom of fury, his unique ardent hate of injustice, and with his utter command of American Eng-

lish, unadorned, driving, and warmed up in Hell.

Among our contemporary clergy and progressive political leadership—people for whom "eloquence" is not necessarily a given—it is worse, and at precisely a moment when it needs to be better. Not only has the Left failed to fashion a rhetoric of its own that can stand up to the neo-Kipling bombast of the Right; it has failed to consult the example of the founding father of modern dissent, even though the example is but a mouse-click away.

"When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory. . ."

That is all one needs as a starting-point, really. Upon the hard clear surface of such a truth, one can proceed to erect any number of nubs, snappers, verbal searchlights, shining shafts of truth spoken to power.

But perhaps it is not a failure of imagination alone that has inhibited our would-be paragons of protest from emulating Mark Twain. He himself witnessed the arrival of the true enemies of modern dissent, the dark Twins of Anti-Genius whose presence we now largely take for granted. One twin was Marketing. "I don't think the prayer will be published in my time," the author wrote to a friend after the piece was rejected. "None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth." The other was Official Power. "The half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness," reports "The War-Prayer"'s narrator, "straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way."

Given such opposition, it is not hard to understand why "The War-Prayer" remains little more than an entertaining curiosity in our times, as dangerous to emulate as, say, Howard Dean's self-annihilating Scream. As the Prayer's narrator himself admits,

"It was believed, afterward, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said."

Notes

[1] The questioner was Charles Marsh, a professor of religion at the University of Virginia, Charles Marsh, "Wayward Christian Soldiers," *New York Times on the Web* 20 January 2006, 30 September 2006 <www.nytimes.com/2006/01/20/opinion/20marsh.html>