

Mark Twain's Final Offensive: "The War-Prayer" and American Religious Nationalism

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Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer," while clearly grounded in the outbreak of the Spanish-American war at a time when volunteers were the primary fighting force, drew upon the succeeding years in which professional troops replaced the generally rag-tag volunteers who first mustered in the thousands for a taste of martial glory wherever it was being served up. Twain spoke in his indictment of the invocation of divine favoritism to a broader group of volunteers, however, in addressing the faithful who offered up their support for the war, in whatever forms it had taken or would take. By the time he attempted to circulate it, the Philippine "insurrection" had been declared over, unilaterally, on the symbolic date of July 4, 1902. But the conquest of the Islamic southern Philippines, where the Spanish had never fully gained control and where resistance was persisting against the new foreign invasion, had continued to pique Twain's anti-imperialist ire. The politically-inflected religious framework in which he couched "The War-Prayer" is thus worth contemplating.

In positing an unspoken will to destruction among the pastors joining patriotic fervor to religious beseeching of the Almighty, Twain aimed his rapier wit not only at nationalism, but at the un-Christian version of Christianity used to justify the slaughter of the Fili-

pinos and anyone else who would stand in the way of a sanctified national glory that not so long before would have been seen as an unseemly violation of republican principles. The decision to take the entire Philippine archipelago, rather than a naval base from which the Open Door to the actual objective of the trans-Pacific thrust of 1898, China, could be held open, was justified by President William McKinley in terms privileging Christian mission. Ignoring the Catholicism of more than 90 percent of Filipinos, McKinley pledged to "Christianize" the archipelago's populace, promising them "benevolent assimilation" into the American fold, if not equal political rights or anything so rash as self-government.

Before that tortured logic gained sway, Twain was originally a supporter of the idea of the United States' intervention in the Philippines, noting that "it is a worthy thing to fight for one's freedom; it is another sight finer to fight for another man's." As he came to see that what was in store for the Philippines was not U.S. assistance to the brave patriots of Asia's first anti-colonial revolution, but a widely unwelcomed imposition of a new version of alien rule, Twain lent his considerable reputation to the Anti-Imperialist League and set about deflating the pretensions of the militarists and glory hounds who saw in the new frontier bounties material and psychological. The power of the anti-imperial movement, much of it derived from Americans who evinced no particular sympathy for Filipinos but who trumpeted plenty of concern for the race-mixing potential of the venture, was never sufficient to contend for popular support with triumphal expansionists seeking a new frontier for markets and medals. Twain was particularly withering in his assessment of the latter breed, as exemplified by the vainglorious General Frederick Funston, who had burnished earlier self-promoting military exploits by employing subterfuge to capture the fugitive Filipino leader Emilio Aguinaldo in 1901, and, later, by Gen. Leonard Wood, whose bombardment of defenseless Moro women and children taking refuge in a Mindanao crater took 600 lives. Joining the two in infamy, he noted President Theodore Roosevelt's "joy over the splendid achievement of his fragrant pet, General Wood," noting that it "brings to mind an earlier presidential ecstasy," when a cablegram announcing Funston's feat so thrilled "that meekest and mildest and gentlest and least masculine of men, President McKinley," that he "could not control his joy and gratitude, but was obliged to express it in motions resembling a dance." McKinley, Twain wrote, "instantly shot that militia Colonel aloft over the heads of a hundred clean and honorable veteran officers of the army and made him a Brigadier General in the regular service, and clothed him in the honorable uniform of that rank, thus disgracing the uniform, the flag, the nation, and himself."

Twain was, in short, no shrinking violet when it came to laying on the bile, and no national icons—not popular military heroes, nor even a recently assassinated or popular

sitting president—would be spared his published scorn. Yet in his postscript to “The War-Prayer,” and his acknowledgement that he would not live to see such a religion-skewering piece printed, Twain signaled that he saw no hope of cutting deeper into the mindset of the public itself, into the pious fictions that underwrote the national will to wage ruthless combat on an outmatched opponent. Having long since experienced financially and politically the dominant culture’s rejection of his stance, having even been called a traitor for undercutting the national mythology, he was unbowed—“the nation is divided, half patriots and half traitors and no one can tell which from which,”—but when it came to criticizing war-supporting Americans who found it a natural thing to seek the favor of God in their nation’s earthly struggles, Twain knew he was aiming his words squarely at an audience that was bound to reject them. His postscript regarding the presumed lunacy of the old man with the untamed mop of white hair raised the question of someone, at least, being unmoored from reality. But who? Explicit recognition of the depth of the delusions to which his audience was in thrall tossed down a gauntlet: Was the claim of the unspoken twin-prayer truly the conjuring of a fevered imagination, or an undeniable point of logic and thus an accusation of the same status hurled now not just at war-waging leaders and self-promoters, but at a far broader swath of American Christendom, one wielding not military power, but the market power to muzzle such perceived apostasy?

The muscular Christianity rising with the new century depended upon maintenance of the tight linkage between national and religious aims. Advance agents of empire such as Christian missions across China, and in turn the Philippines, were gaining the kind of support they needed—witness the role of Philippines-based U.S. troops in helping to put down the Boxer Rebellion aimed at over-reaching Christian missionaries in China—and there would be no turning back from the globalizing movement. By attacking the foundational linkage between religion and advancing American empire, Twain was crossing the Rubicon into a field of assured destruction. That he foresaw his words being buried until at least after his bones showed his understanding of the primacy of religious identity in the evolving imperial order he and so many others were so dismayed to see emerging as the new century unfolded. Born in a fiction of religious justification, the colonization of the Philippines to serve national strategic, commercial, and psychological desires would remain swaddled in the obfuscatory rhetoric invoking a nationalist deity long after Twain’s laments had passed from public notice. The shifting of the theater of war from Christian areas to the Islamic south, taking place with increasing ferocity right around the time the great author generated “The War-Prayer,” would only increase the degree to which religious difference would be used to frame the encounter. Twain would die before

that unofficial but all-too-real extension of the war would end, and while his words would eventually emerge to issue a still-relevant call to reason, the linkage between national and religious identities would likewise persist into yet another new century of conflict.