"From the Throne": What the Stranger in "The War-Prayer" Says about Mark Twain's Theology

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Written in reaction to America's imperialist aggression against the Philippines, "The War-Prayer" is Mark Twain's lacerating critique of religiosity and complacent patriotism in time of war. While its anti-imperialistic and anti-war themes are obvious, often overlooked is what this caustic short story reveals about Twain's theological views late in life—a time many scholars view as a dark and even nihilistic phase for the distraught humorist.

The narrative's sharp political edge might seem to preclude such a personal reading. However, the origin of the Stranger in "The War-Prayer"—who comes "from the Throne—bearing a message from God Almighty"—may provide a deeper, more complex glimpse into Twain's ever-evolving theological views during his last decade. The text, in fact, can be seen as an important link between Twain's anti-imperialism and unorthodox

theology. Written in 1905, "The War-Prayer" seems to be something of a sequel to Twain's ironic call in "The United States of Lyncherdom" (1901) for American missionaries to stop their imperialistic proselytizing in Asia and come home to "convert these Christians." The divine Stranger in "The War-Prayer" attempts to do just that when the "messenger of the Most High" interrupts the church service. He is rejected by these Christians just as the "good Christians" of Eseldorf will later reject the mysterious stranger in *No. 44*, who is also a divine emissary, in my opinion (see "God's *Real* Message: *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* and the Influence of Liberal Religion on Mark Twain," in *The Mark Twain Annual 2005*). As I hope to show in what follows, when compared to other strangers in Twain's writing (especially in the three Mysterious Stranger manuscripts), the anti-imperialistic Stranger in "The War-Prayer" also suggests that Twain's last years may not have been as despondent as is generally thought.

Recent research has provided fresh insights into Twain's complex religious views that bolster this interpretation. Perhaps most relevant to this paper, though, is Kerry Driscoll's work on Twain's affinity for Native American religion.[1] According to Driscoll, Twain was deeply impressed by Richard Irving Dodge's 1877 book entitled *The Plains of the Great West and their Inhabitants*. In particular, Twain was intrigued by Dodge's somewhat flawed account of the "Good God/Bad God" dualism in native religion. Driscoll surmises that this dichotomy resolved for Twain some of the paradoxical and abstruse aspects of the self-contradicting Christian Deity. After raising the fascinating possibility that Twain considered converting Huckleberry Finn to Indian religion in *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians*, Driscoll concludes that "the dualistic notion of a Good and Bad God remained with [Twain], becoming a benchmark against which he measured the myriad deficiencies of Christianity."

Driscoll's insights into Twain's attraction to a balanced view encompassing good and bad aspects of the Godhead undermine the lopsided opinion that his religious views were characterized by a pervasive pessimism. One of the "symbols of despair" often cited as evidence of this growing despair is the satanic character of the Stranger in Paine-Duneka's bowdlerized version of *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance* published in 1916. However, the enigmatic and ever-shifting nature of Twain's "favorite fictive spokesman" may actually reflect Native American dualism rather than orthodox Christian notions of God and Satan.[2]

Supporting this possibility is the nuanced insights of religious scholar Ake Hultkrantz into Indian religious life. In his discussion of the Mythic Twins story inherent in many Native American cultures, Hultkrantz expands upon Dodge's narrow presentation of native "Good God/Bad God" theology and offers a finer distinction between a beneficent

Supreme Being and a co-equal trickster hero. In some instances the trickster and Supreme Being are one, while in others he may be one of two divine twins born of a heavenly god and vegetation goddess: one twin being positive, the other destructive and unfriendly. In any event, although divine like the Supreme Being, the trickster often "makes less beneficial or ambiguous contributions to creation."[3]

Hultkrantz's insights into the trickster present intriguing parallels with the various Strangers haunting Twain's work. Of course, the divine trickster is not unfamiliar in Twain studies. Lawrence Berkove observes that Twain "regarded God as the greatest trickster of them all," and saw the Deity as a malevolent being whose cosmic tricks have abandoned humankind in "a ruined Eden overlooking Hell."[4] Reflecting the general view that the Stranger epitomizes Twain's increasingly bleak ontology, Berkove notes how this "gloomy" theology shapes many of Twain's own trickster characters, including the baleful "mysterious stranger" from "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg."[5]

At first glance the Stranger claiming to be a messenger of God in "The War-Prayer" would appear to be an odd exception to this prevailing opinion. However, closer examination of him and his fellow supernatural characters within the context of native mythology's divine trickster motif suggests this heavenly emissary may actually be the rule rather than the exception. Evidence for this possibility extends as far back as 1869 when, in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain refers to Jesus as a "mysterious stranger" who is co-equal with God. Although this particular reference to Jesus lacks any of the mischievous attributes associated with the Native American trickster, four chapters later Twain mentions apocryphal gospel narratives that do indeed show Jesus with similar impish qualities (Chapters 47 and 51, respectively). Whether consciously or not, it seems apparent that at some level in his imagination Twain links the Stranger with the divine trickster archetype.

This dualistic trickster construct persists 40 years later in Twain's controversial Mysterious Stranger manuscripts (written between 1897 and 1908). These three manuscripts, featuring Strangers with trickster characteristics, were written in two basic phases. The first phase (1897-1900) began as Twain struggled to cope with the abrupt death of his daughter Susy; his effort to make sense of that tragedy seems deeply influenced by the "Good God/ Bad God" dualism of native religion. For example, the two Stranger manuscripts Twain began at this time reflect the tension between his darker ontological views in "The Chronicles of Young Satan" balanced by the more hopeful tenets of "Schoolhouse Hill." In the former, the menacing Stranger named Satan wantonly kills beings he creates, while in the latter a more beneficent Stranger named Quarante-quatre, "raised partly in heaven, partly in hell," yearns to rectify the harm his father Satan has inflicted on the world.[6]

In the second phase (1902-08), during which he intermittently wrote the longer, more complex *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain's effort to understand God remains within a dualistic trickster framework. Now, however, his theological focus has evolved from discerning the malicious/beneficent aspects of the Deity toward exploring a "False God/Real God" dichotomy common in his late works. In my reading of *No. 44*, the Mysterious Stranger is not satanic at all, but is similar to the divine trickster Jesus who is equal to God in *Innocents Abroad*.[7] The Stranger in "The War-Prayer," which Twain wrote in 1905 not long after his wife died, supports this contention in that, unlike the dualistic Strangers in the first phase, the origin of this Stranger ("commissioned of God") is clearly divine. Just as Young Satan and Quarante-quatre represented Twain's ontological attempt to make sense of personal tragedy, the Stranger in "The War-Prayer" indicates a significant shift in his perspective outward in his Job-like effort to unravel what he calls in *No. 44* the "chaos of unimaginable incomprehensibilities" of the genuine Deity.[8]

In this respect, both the Stranger and Forty-Four are divine tricksters who ultimately reveal the totality of God's appalling Truth to an uncomprehending humanity. Where Forty-Four struggles to pour the shoreless expanse of God's *real* message into August Feldner's limited jug-like consciousness, the Stranger expresses an aspect of God's jarring cosmic view when he utters the "unspoken part" of the congregation's prayer for military victory. To accomplish this purpose, both Strangers use tricks to subvert humanity's false notions of the Divine (e.g., the Stranger prays to the God of Love to inflict death and destruction on Creation, while Forty-Four's mind-bending theological stunts leave August bewildered). Consequently, like Jesus in the Gospels, both also suffer rejection.

Therefore, the Stranger in "The War-Prayer" indicates that Twain's views toward God at this point are not entirely despairing. In fact, evoking Driscoll's insight into native dualism, this divine trickster represents Twain's enduring belief in a beneficent Supreme Being that remained an integral part of his always-evolving "all-round view of Our Father in Heaven."

Notes

[1] For examples from the previous two years, see *Mark Twain's Religion* by William E. Phipps (Macon: Mercer UP, 2003), "'The Widow's Son': Masonic Parody in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,*" by Randall A. Clack, *The Mark Twain Annual 2004*, no. 2; "Was Huck a Unitarian? Christian Liberalism, Joseph Twichell, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*," by Dwayne Eutsey, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 88.1-2; and Kerry Driscoll's "'How Much Higher and Finer is the Indian God': Mark Twain and Native American Religion," presented at the Fifth International Conference on Mark Twain Studies, August 2005, Elmira College.)

[2] The phrase is from Ron Powers, *Mark Twain: A Life*, (New York: Free Press, 2005).

[3] Ake Hultkrantz, "Native Religions of North America: The Power of Visions and Fertility," in *Religious Traditions of the World*, ed. H. Byron Earhart (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

[4] Lawrence L. Berkove, "The Trickster God in Roughing It," in *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction,*" ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001).

[5] There are many other examples of this view, including Roger B. Saloman, "Escape as Nihilism: The Mysterious Stranger," and Henry Nash Smith, "A Supernatural Spectator," in *Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" and the Critics*, ed. John S. Tuckey (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1968).

[6] Even the stranger in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is reminiscent of the trickster Satan in the Book of Job, who belongs to God's heavenly court and brings Job to a painful insight into humility, just as the Stranger's malicious trick does for the citizens of Hadleyburg.

[7] Dwayne Eutsey, "Mark Twain's Attitudes Toward Religion: Sympathy for the Devil or Radical Christianity?," *Religion and Literature* 31.2 (1999).

[8] This tension between human perceptions of God and the genuine Deity is established early in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) when a follower of the Hussite woman tells Father Adolph she worships "only God" not church doctrine (i.e., the Virgin). There are many clues hinting at Forty-Four's co-equal status with God throughout the narrative; for example, his discussion of the creative power of Thought is similar to Twain's description of God creating the universe through Thought in *Letters from the Earth* (New York: Harper, 1962).