

Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer," Youth Culture in the Rural Midwest, and the Problem of Placing Religion in Historical Narratives about the 1960s

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During the early 1970s, I was a reasonable candidate to join the ranks of Richard Nixon's silent majority. At this time I was a high school student in a small town in rural Iowa, with moderate-to-conservative parents who had bought me a *World Book Encyclopedia*, let me watch network TV, but otherwise largely sheltered me from the world usually signified by "the sixties." My school's academic standards were low and I can best convey its political consciousness through noting that its idea of a controversial library acquisition was *Ebony* magazine. My town's school board banned *The Grapes of Wrath* because it considered Preacher Casey too hostile to religion—and this did not even make most of the students curious enough to read the book. My friends read almost nothing except magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and *Seventeen*; they took their cultural inspiration from Top 40 radio.

In this context, cultural seeds were planted that helped me grow by the 1980s into a person well to the Left on the political spectrum, an organizer against aspects of U.S. foreign and military policy, and a scholar working within the American Studies movement on the interplay between religion and Left-liberal social movements. One of the seeds that helped me move in this direction was Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer." This essay describes how I came to quote "The War-Prayer" in my first public speech against U.S. military policy; it goes on to suggest that this episode is not merely idiosyncratic and trivial—that it may help us rethink certain aspects of how we tell a broader story about religion and oppositional movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

When scholars in American Studies write about historical trends of the 1960s, they typically stress the breakdown of a New Deal coalition and the rise of the Civil Rights movement and New Left. In the past quarter-century they have also focused on feminism and paid increasing attention to queer theory, post-1965 immigration, issues of empire, and the rise of the New Right.¹ When it comes to treating the role of religion in this history, however, their attention has been quite circumscribed. Religion is often an optional add-on that appears (if at all) near the end of lists beginning with race, class, and gender. Insofar as religion does gain attention, it is often treated within a limited repertoire of categories:

part of the Civil Rights movement and Black nationalism (insofar as scholars treat oppositional religion), part of the New Right (insofar as scholars treat white Christians), part of the growth of Asian immigrant communities (insofar as scholars stress cultural diversity), or part of alternative religions rooted in the counterculture and/or New Age movement (insofar as scholars seek people who are simultaneously white, young, oppositional, and religious.) This is not all wrong—but the list needs to be expanded and reworked. Imagine putting together a puzzle, only to discover several pieces left over at the end. I intend my story to be like such a leftover piece that does not fit well in existing historical narratives, but which may suggest the need to take the puzzle apart and rebuild it more carefully.

No doubt there are many reasons why I did not join the silent majority, but one significant reason involved “The War-Prayer.” By my high school years, I had worked through much of the meager collection of books at my town’s public library, and had gained a habit of ordering books from a service called the Scholastic Book Club. This company circulated a flyer through the schools, offering a range of inexpensive paperbacks considered age-appropriate. My school collected the orders and distributed the books. In this way I had fallen in love with a collection of Twain’s stories, moved on to other works by Twain ordered through the interlibrary loan system, and bought an illustrated copy of “The War-Prayer” from the Scholastic Book Club.² All of this was without a teacher to provide much context for understanding Twain (my English teacher assigned readings approved by the above-mentioned school board and taught them by reading to us from *Cliff’s Notes*). Nor did I have any significant knowledge about the Spanish-American War, the U.S. invasion of the Philippines, the colonization of the Congo, the history of Vietnam, or even the notion that some people considered the U.S. an empire.³ I knew almost nothing about such matters except that the critiques of the Vietnam War that I read in *Time* magazine (the “leftward extreme” of my available news sources) made more sense to me than Paul Harvey newscasts or speeches by Nixon.

In this context I inserted “The War-Prayer” into my town’s public discourse in a way that—although tiny in its cultural weight—may be symptomatic of the shape of youth culture in the heartland and Twain’s place within that culture. It was customary for high school students in my town’s Lutheran church to lead an early morning worship service on Easter Sunday, before the main event of the morning, which was going into the church basement to eat excessive amounts of pancakes and scrambled eggs. I took it upon myself to organize this service. Thus it was that, after opening with recorded music from a Christian rock band and juxtaposing this with elements from the Lutheran worship book, I stepped into the pulpit and read a large chunk of “The War-Prayer.” This was the center-

piece of my Easter homily, framed by comments to the effect that Lutheran supporters of Nixon's war should imagine where they fit in the narrative.

If you wonder what subtle theological points I was making about how Twain relates to understandings of Jesus' resurrection, there were no such points unless they were implicit in my comparison between Twain's scenario and the upbeat and complacent mood that my hearers expected in an Easter sunrise service.⁴ My purposes were blunter: I wanted to say that the war was inconsistent with Christian values, so I did. This service was the public platform available to me, so I used it. Twain had more cultural capital than I did, so I tried to tap into it.

This engagement with Twain was undoubtedly more important for me—since it was my first speech against U.S. militarism—than for my listeners. I'm not sure what they thought; in this community people tended to hold grudges rather than confront opponents directly. Some probably gained little except a sense that we were cute and/or insolent when we played Christian rock, so that my political critique went over their heads or was reframed simply as a (conceptually empty) breach of decorum. A few grumbled. I had a reputation as an intellectual by this time, so whatever prestige this conferred—which was largely negative prestige in my school—may have rubbed off on Twain. Whether Twain attracted any fans on his own merits, I can't say.

Of course reading Twain—either his work in general or “The War-Prayer” in particular—did not plant the seeds of my oppositional consciousness by itself. Twain was only one part of a wider set of influences from U.S. culture, alongside comics like *Doonesbury*, books like Thoreau's *Walden* (also discovered through the Scholastic Book Club), and above all the counter-cultural and anti-war themes in rock music. Among the musicians that permeated my consciousness were some that may seem surprising, or at least off-center, compared to those canonized by heavyweight rock critics. Filtering down to me in rural Iowa was more Chicago than the Grateful Dead or Jimi Hendrix, more Moody Blues than James Brown or Sly Stone. This seems of a piece with reading “The War-Prayer” instead of the Port Huron Statement, Malcolm X, the Pentagon Papers, or the SCUM Manifesto. Nevertheless it was enough to carry me into the Left academy.

At this time I knew little about traditions of Christian opposition to U.S. empire—traditions in which I later rooted myself as activist and scholar.⁵ My all-white town paid little attention to Martin Luther King, Jr. (who was killed when I was only eleven) and I had not heard of Vine Deloria, Jr. or William Sloane Coffin. Thus Twain's use of Christian ideas to critique pro-war Christians as hypocrites was among the more forceful articulations of anti-war religious discourse that I read before I went to college. Some mild ripples of the

Christian counterculture—the idea that Jesus was something like a hippie without the sex and drugs, as in the film *Jesus Christ Superstar*—had reached me in rural Iowa, so that selected Biblical texts about sharing wealth and working for peace were also among the more politically radical things that I had read.⁶ However, given the forms of religion that I had experienced directly in my middle-of-the-road church, it was hard to put such texts into an oppositional context. In my teen-aged mind, "The War-Prayer" merged with counter-cultural discourse, and in this context it seemed logical to bring Twain into an Easter service.

Of course we must explore what forms of popular culture "happened to reach me" in the context of a wider set of forces that shaped this culture: the demographic impact of the baby boom, the threat of the draft (which was declining in these years but not for that reason gone from our consciousness), the politics of prestige in literary culture, and the long-term changes set in motion by desegregation, feminism, global struggles against colonialism, and so on. This was the context in which I could order an inexpensive copy of "The War-Prayer" from the Scholastic Book Club and find encouragement for doing so (countervailing against my town's anti-intellectualism) from parts of popular culture such as the satire of the *Laugh-In* show, interviews with my sports idol Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (the first black Muslim I thought about seriously), and anti-war songs on my *Chicago Live at Carnegie Hall* album. Nevertheless it is interesting that the specific way that this set of influences was articulated, by me, in my first public protest aligning myself with the Left, was through reading "The War-Prayer" in an Easter homily.

This episode may help us rethink how we narrate recent U.S. cultural history. I do not propose this story as paradigmatic for dramatizing the place of religion in such narratives. Nevertheless, as a leftover puzzle piece—one that does not fit standard narratives of civil rights, right-wing fundamentalism, new immigration, or the counterculture—it is not completely idiosyncratic. We could identify many other spaces within mainstream Christianity that have nurtured traditions of opposition and pushed them forward. Many pundits and scholars discount liberal Christianity, assuming that it is insignificant compared to the Christian Right and slipping toward oblivion. However, this interpretation obscures considerable ongoing strength on the mainline Protestant Left (the space where I eventually wound up) as well as a sizable bloc of white evangelicals who are politically moderate to liberal (the place where my story began).⁷

Elsewhere I have tried to complicate questions about genealogies for the U.S. Left.⁸ Consider that it is now common to point out that the attention to women in narratives about the 1960s has been low compared to male leaders of SDS, that the influence of Brit-

ish cultural studies has been overstressed in histories of American Studies compared to home-grown U.S. radicals like W.E.B. DuBois or William Appleman Williams, and that the influence of Midwestern radicals inflected by Christianity and populism has been underplayed compared to secular Jewish and Marxian radicals from New York. Somewhat similarly, this case study of “The War-Prayer” in rural Iowa suggests that there were multiple roads to keeping alive oppositional traditions in U.S. culture. Traveling along some of these roads, Twain’s “War-Prayer”—and by extension other traditions of protesting U.S. empire in the name of Christian values—deserve a higher profile than they sometimes have received in the past.

Notes

- 1 For example, see Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989); David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: from Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994).
- 2 *Mark Twain’s Best: Eight Great Short Stories by America’s Master Humorist* (New York: Scholastic Library Editions, 1962). I have lost my copy of “The War-Prayer” but it was similar to the Harper Perennial edition, 1984. While searching in my library for these books I found another one that was probably purchased from the Scholastic Book Club: Frederic Anderson, ed., *A Pen Warmed Up in Hell: Mark Twain in Protest* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972).
- 3 On Twain’s relation to these issues, see Jim Zwick, ed., *Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire: Anti-imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992).
- 4 On Twain’s blend of skepticism and disdain for some forms of Christianity, on one hand, and use of selected religious ideas on the other, see Harold Bush, Jr., “A Moralizer in Disguise: Mark Twain and American Religion,” *Historical Guide to Mark Twain*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford UP, 2002), 54-94, and Dwayne Eutsey, “Was Huck a Unitarian? Christian Liberalism, James Twichell, and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*,” *Soundings* 88.1-2 (2005): 44-70.
- 5 See Rebecca Alpert, ed., *Voices of the Religious Left: a Contemporary Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000) and Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999).
- 6 Treatments of the discourse I have in mind include Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper, 1974) and the more politically and theological liberal examples in Carol Flake, *Redemptorama: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelicalism* (New York: Penguin, 1984).
- 7 For more in this vein see my *Religion, Culture, and Politics in Modern America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, forthcoming). For a sociological survey of a range of U.S. Christians, both liberal and conservative, see Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).
- 8 Hulsether, “Three Challenges for the Field of American Studies: Relating to Cultural Studies, Addressing Wider Publics, and Coming to Terms with Religions” *American Studies* 38 # 2 (1997), 117-147; see also the introduction to *Building a Protestant Left*.