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 ruth-
less 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 founda-
tional 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 emerg-
ing as the new century unfolded. Born in a fiction of religious justification, the coloniza-
tion 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.