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God's Imperialism: Mark Twain and the Religious War Between Imperialists and Anti-Imperialists

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By the time Mark Twain crafted "The War-Prayer," he had long opposed American cultural and military imperialism. Particularly, he fumed at the notion that the Christian God was an imperialist. Twain berated church leaders for endorsing militancy and political leaders for employing religious language. In "To The Person Sitting in Darkness," published in 1901, Twain attacked Protestant missionaries for their violence against native peoples and efforts at economic exploitation. "Christendom has been playing it badly of late years," Twain lamented, "and must certainly suffer by it, in my opinion." Then in "The War-Prayer," written four years later yet unpublished at the time, Twain once again turned his "weapons of satire" against religiously legitimated imperialism. The parody could have taken place at any white Protestant church: Christians singing the praises of war; military men believing their murderous crusades holy; and the American flag invoking mystical feelings. Twain's interruption of this familiar scene with an "aged stranger"—who seemed a ghost, a demon, and an angel all in one—was ominous. The "ghastly" stranger spoke of a prayer that the congregants felt, but never spoke—that in Americans' prayers for victory, they were secretly praying for others' defeat; in their supplications for protection of their sons, they were asking God for the deaths of others. The silent prayers approached God as a murderer and a nationalist. And this God, Twain implied, could not be the God of the Bible.¹

With "The War-Prayer," Twain paid homage to one of the most neglected elements of the War of 1898 and the struggle between imperialists and anti-imperialists: that all players framed their arguments with religious rhetoric. Both sides invoked God; both sides invoked biblical scriptures. In the process, a host of church leaders, politicians, and writers demonstrated that ideas about the sacred were a central feature of the rise of the American empire. With his passionate anti-imperialist writings, epitomized by "The War-Prayer," Twain signified on the importance of religion in American culture and sought to turn its power to the side of peace and universal fellowship. Sadly, he and the other anti-imperialists were defeated by a jingoistic wave that associated American national interests with God, an association that has yet to be severed.²

When the War of 1898 began, the majority of white American Protestants rallied to the cause. One Methodist minister announced, "[O]ur cause will be just, and Methodism

will be ready to do its full duty. Every Methodist preacher will be a recruiting officer.” Another preacher, A. E. Kittredge, told his New York congregation, “The present crisis of this Nation . . . is in harmony with Christian teachings. . . . This contest is a holy uprising in God’s name for the uplifting of a wronged and downtrodden people.” For these ministers, God was directing the United States against the Spanish Empire, and the rewards would be many: missionary work opened in Cuba, the Philippines, and throughout Asia; commerce following the cross into these regions; and the growth of American exports.³

These religious endorsements were echoed and furthered by a host of political and cultural leaders, including Senator Albert Beveridge, Theodore Roosevelt, and novelist Thomas Dixon, Jr. Christian jingoists could not have asked for a President more agreeable to their aims than William McKinley. Raised in the Methodist Church and a churchgoer for his entire life, McKinley expressed keen interest in religious affairs, especially missionary efforts. In 1900, he told the Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions in New York City, “The story of the Christian missions is one of thrilling interest and marvelous results.” Missionaries, he claimed, “have been the pioneers of civilization. . . . They have illumined the darkness of idolatry and superstition with the light of intelligence and truth. . . . They furnish us examples of forbearance and fortitude, of patience and unyielding purpose, and of a spirit which triumphs, not by force of might, but by the majesty of the right.” Before and during military battles, he often referred to the struggle as a moral war of duty and obligation. “I shall never get into a war until I am sure that God and man approve,” he remarked at one point. No wonder a prominent tale at the time was that McKinley claimed to have heard God tell him to begin the war.⁴

But McKinley and these others were met by a chorus of anti-imperialists just as willing to turn to the sacred. Anti-imperialists lost no time in pointing out the religious hypocrisy of the war. Carl Schurz claimed that casting the war as a holy crusade was blasphemous: “The American people may well pause before accepting a counsel which, in seeking to unload upon Providence the responsibility for schemes of reckless ambition involving a palpable breach of faith, falls little short of downright blasphemy.” Responding to one of Beveridge’s pro-imperialism speeches, George F. Hoar compared the lust for imperialism to the temptation of Christ: “The Devil taketh him up into an extremely high mountain and showeth him all the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them and saith unto him ‘All these things will be thine if thou wilt fall down and worship me.’” Presbyterian minister Charles Spahr railed against the American public for creating a new set of divine edicts that legitimated greed. Americans, he raged, acted as if the Ten Commandments actually read: “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me and only gold above me. . . . Thou shalt

not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, but shalt use it profitably to sanctify thy greed. . . . Thou shalt not kill except to extend trade. . . . Thou shalt not covet but grab."⁵

Any African Americans considered the wars against people of color abroad another aspect of the wars against people of color at home, battles that included racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and widespread lynchings. Church segregation for African American troops in the South enraged some African Americans. Writing to the *Christian Recorder*, Chaplain George W. Prioleau described his encounter at a white church: "[W]hen an officer of the United States Army, a Negro chaplain . . . goes on Sunday to the M.E. Church (White) to worship god, he is given three propositions to consider, take the extreme back seat, go up in the gallery or go out." He and his compatriots chose the last option, "as we were not a back seat or gallery Christian, we preferred going out." They refused to let the matter die, and "inform[ed] them on the next day that the act was heinous, uncivilized, un-christian, [and] un-American." Racism and violence were now so prevalent within the nation, in fact, that one black editor proposed that the thousands of white missionaries abroad immediately return home to civilize white Americans. "With the government acquiescing in the oppression and butchery of a dark race in this country and the enslaving and slaughtering of a dark race in the Philippines," he suggested that "we think it time to call all missionaries home and have them work on our own people." Quite simply, the people of Cuba and the Philippines were not the ones who needed religion to make them moral and ethical: white Americans did.⁶

Throughout the War of 1898 and in the years after it, anti-imperialists endeavored to meet religious fire with religious fire. Mark Twain was a part of this discursive battle. "The War-Prayer" was a beautiful and compelling expression of the anti-imperialist challenge to Christian justification for the War of 1898 and the rise of the American empire. It not only followed his own history of indicting American Christianity for serving as the handmaiden of imperialism and militarism, but also drew upon the religious arguments made by a host of anti-imperialists. "The War-Prayer," still generally unread and unknown, was a cry for compassion and honesty in a world gone mad with death and destruction in the name of God. It is an essay that should be read and considered today.

Notes

¹ Jim Zwick, ed., *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire: Anti-Imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1992), 12-13, 23-39; Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 10-181.

² For more on religion and turn-of-the-century American nationalism, see Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana

State UP, 2005).

- ³ Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (1936 reprint; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 282; "The Duty of Christians," *New York Times*, April 24, 1898: 13; Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 209-49.
- ⁴ Robert P. Porter, *Life of William McKinley: Soldier, Lawyer, Statesman* (Cleveland: N. G. Hamilton, 1896), 362-68; *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley from March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900* (New York: Doubleday, 1900), 367; David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 53 and 58.
- ⁵ Carl Schurz, "Thoughts on American Imperialism," *The Century* 56.5 (September 1898): 781-88; Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper, 1963), 154; Charles B. Spahr, "The Imperialist Religion," *The Public* 3 (May 5, 1900).
- ⁶ Quoted in Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *"Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle For Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1972); Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975), 185.