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Let U.S. Prey: Mark Twain and Hubert Harrison on Religion and Empire

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In a 1918 article appearing in his magazine *The Voice*, the prolific writer, orator, critic, educator, and political activist Hubert Harrison wondered whether “Negroes of the Western world quite realize. . . that. . . [w]ars are not fought for ideals but for lands whose populations can be put to work, for resources that can be minted into millions, for trade that can be made to enrich the privileged few.”¹ While he was referring specifically to King

Leopold II of Belgium's bloody campaign of exploitation in the Congo, Harrison was very clear that imperialist campaigns the world over follow a similar blueprint:

And, so, when Nations go to war, they never openly declare what they WANT. They must camouflage their sordid greed behind some sounding phrase like, 'freedom of the seas,' 'self-determination,' 'liberty' or 'democracy.' But only the ignorant millions ever think that those are the real objects of their bloody rivalries. When the war is over, the mask is dropped, and then they seek 'how to best scramble at the shearer's feast.' It is then that they disclose their real war aims.²

The West Indian-born Harrison, an ardent anti-imperialist and progenitor of the New Negro movement who moved to New York in 1900, was never a member of the Anti-Imperialist League, but shared with many of the league's members a life-long commitment "to expose and oppose imperialism, whether by the United States or by any other imperial power."³

One member of the Anti-Imperialist League with whom Harrison shared a great deal of philosophical and political commitments was the famed American writer Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain. Vice-president of the League from 1901 until his death in 1910, Clemens/Twain was a staunch and outspoken opponent of imperialist ventures around the world and the wars that enabled them. In two of his most famous writings against imperialist wars, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" and "The War-Prayer," turn-of-the-century notions of race, nation, and religion come under withering satirical attack. Both stories deal with the obvious but undeclared intentions and outcomes of imperial aggression, which he describes in "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" as being acquired through the twelve "blessings-of-civilization" and comprised of an impressive rhetorical manifest of items for "export" such as justice, liberty, Christianity, mercy, and honesty. Twain, however, exposes the true aims of the imperial export business by observing that delivering the "blessings of civilization to our brother who sits in darkness has been good trade and has paid well.... There is more money in it, more territory, more sovereignty, and other kinds of emolument, than there is in any other game that is played."⁴

In their life and work, both Twain and Harrison were extremely critical of the ways in which religious observance and teaching could be bent toward decidedly secular and vulgar ends. In part, this stemmed from their shared interest in Freethought—a nineteenth century philosophical movement that prioritized rationality above all other forms of knowledge and authority, especially religion.⁵ They were especially savage in their treatment of those whom they felt employed a brand of religious patriotism in an effort to ad-

vance imperialist aims, which at the turn of the twentieth century featured a formidable list of countries led by Britain in Africa and the United States in the Caribbean and the Pacific Rim. In both print and street-corner orations, Harrison would decry the irrationality in much religious thought, and the dangerous links between religious devotion and imperialism, in his critique of the "civilizing mission." A typical critique explained that:

. . . the Kingword of modern nations is POWER. It is only Sunday school kids and people of child-races who take seriously such fables as that in the 'Band of Hope Review' when we were children that 'the secret of England's greatness is in the Bible.' The secret of England's greatness (as well as any other great nation's) is not bibles but bayonets—bayonets, business and brains. As long as the white nations have a preponderance of these, so long will they rule. Ask Japan: she knows. And as long as the lands of Africa can yield billions of business, so long will white brains use bayonets to keep them. . . .⁶

Given Harrison's keen insights into the interrelatedness of race, nation, and empire, he also admired Twain's sensitive and sophisticated understanding not only of the workings of anti-black racism, but, perhaps more importantly, of the Afrodiasporic cultural forms of expression that emerged to challenge them in the New Negro era. He includes Twain in a list of white authors who possess "an intellect above the average, a deep knowledge of humanity and the sympathy of perfect comprehension," admirable traits that he feels "are necessary for the finest flavors of the humorist."⁷

It is perhaps in his underappreciated short piece "The War-Prayer" where Twain makes his most stunning and, I would argue, most effective critique of the dangerous mix of religion and politics. The story depicts a Sunday morning church rally on the eve of a community sending off its "noble young soldiers" to the front of an unspecified war. As the crowd is whipped up into a fever pitch by the preacher's "long" prayer—unprecedented in its "passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language"—an "aged stranger" with "his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness" enters the church, makes his way slowly to the preacher's side at the pulpit, and intones to the assembled war boosters: "I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God!"⁸ Twain's stranger admonishes the audience to recognize the "full import" of their prayer; namely, that "it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think. God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not."⁹ What goes unuttered and, perhaps, insufficiently accounted for is the reality that praying for their soldiers to be protected and victorious means that the foe, by logical extension,

can expect their soldiers (and, undoubtedly, many civilians in the bargain) to face unimaginable suffering:

“O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst’”¹⁰

Harrison is equally concerned with the potentially negative effects that Christian teachings can have on black peoples. In a particularly scathing article dealing with race and religion whose title leaves no doubt about where the author stands on the issue—“The Negro a Conservative: Christianity Still Enslaves the Minds of Those Whose Bodies It Has Long Held Bound”—Harrison proclaims that “Christian America created the color line” and that “Negroes, of all Americans, [should] be found in the Freethought fold, since they have suffered more than any other class of Americans from the dubious blessings of Christianity.”¹¹ Harrison was calling for a new brand of race leadership: one that moved black peoples “to shake off the trammels of such time-serving leaders as Mr. [Booker T.] Washington” and to slip the straitjacket of a black church that “saw to it that the religion taught to slaves should stress the servile virtues of subservience and content[ment].” To chart a new path, Harrison argued, “Negroes must take to reading, study and the development of intelligence as we have never done before.” Holding them up as role models, he praised the Japanese who had studied in Europe but “never used Europe’s education to make them apes of Europe’s culture” as they “absorbed, adopted, transformed and utilized” it. “We Negroes,” he exhorted, “must do the same.”¹²

Asia—Japan and the Philippine Islands in particular—was of special concern for black internationalists like Harrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, the one-time field secretary of the NAACP and U.S. Consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua. In fact, Johnson once speculated that “Little Japan” is perhaps “the greatest hope for the colored races of the world,” their own imperial aspirations notwithstanding.¹³ The belief these black thinkers and activists held in common was that black Americans were and ought to be very concerned with world events at the turn of the twentieth century, especially in

Asia, due to the complicated role black soldiers and commentators played in the expansion of the U.S. imperial project abroad. And although the concept of a "Double-V" campaign (victory abroad against fascism, victory at home against racism) would not emerge until World War II, they believed, as Twain did, that the person sitting, and *preying*, in darkness was the American people themselves.

Notes

¹ Hubert Harrison, "Africa at the Peace Table," *The Voice*, December 26, 1918, quoted in Jeffrey B. Perry, *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 213.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* In moving to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, Harrison joined many other prominent Afrodiasporic Caribbeans who moved to the United States, particularly to New York, at the dawn of the New Negro Movement (1895-1945) and substantially shaped its course as the era of a more assertive and self-assured effort on the part of black peoples to challenge white supremacy.

⁴ Janet Smith, ed., *Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race* (New York: Hill and Wang, [1962] 1994), 10.

⁵ Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, p. 35. For a comprehensive analysis of Freethought in the nineteenth century, see Verle Muhrer and Fred Whitehead, eds., *Freethought on the American Frontier* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁸ Smith, *Damned Human Race*, 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹ Perry, *Hubert Harrison*, 42. The article first appeared in the Freethought journal *Truth Seeker* in 1914 and was later reprinted, with emendations, in his 1917 book, *The Negro and the Nation* (New York: Cosmo-Advocate Publishing Company).

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ Quoted in Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan & China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 25.