

The Influence of Liberal Religion on Mark Twain Dwayne Eutsey

Throughout his writings and his life, Mark Twain earned a well-deserved reputation as a cynical critic of Christianity, as illustrated by his observation that "[i]f Christ were here there is one thing he would not be" a Christian."¹ Beginning with the publication of *The Innocent's Abroad* in 1869, Twain's irreligious sentiments and apparent anger toward religion in general and Christianity in particular have played a major role in how his audience has understood him. Many genteel Victorians, for instance, were outraged by his ridiculing "sacred scenes and things" and accused him of being a "son of the devil." Modernists, on the other hand, embraced him as "the fallen angel of our literature" courageously deconstructing artificial notions of reality to reveal life's absurdity and ultimate meaninglessness.²

There is, however, an overlooked spiritual dimension to Mark Twain's life and work that challenges the widely held perception of him as a devilish nihilist. Where orthodox Victorians demonized him and modernists applauded his jeering treatment of traditional religion, I believe Twain's iconoclasm actually shared more in common with effort of liberal Protestantism to revitalize religious experience in 19th century America. It is apparent to me from his relationships with liberal clergy like Henry Ward Beecher and his close friend Joseph Twichell to his numerous writings on religion that Twain was actively engaged throughout his life in the critical examination and experimentation of what has been called the "theological renaissance of the nineteenth century."³

I would like to examine here briefly the various strands of radical and liberal thought I see underlying Twain's personal religious quest with an eye toward how they were manifested in his writings. As I hope to show, Twain was a lifelong believer who struggled to discover the "light of Gospel"⁴ buried beneath dead doctrine, silly superstitions, and dry theological rationalism of conventional Christian orthodoxy. Like many of his friends among the liberal clergy he embraced such subversive and unorthodox views as deism, the humanity of Jesus, abolitionism, African-American spirituality, and ultimately Unitarianism and Universalism in a lifelong effort to open the hearts and minds of his readers and himself to a direct experience of the presence of the living God.

Background

The most direct and well known connection between Twain and 19th century liberal religious thought can be found in his close friendship with the Rev. Joseph Twichell. Leah Strong, in her book *Joseph Hopkins Twichell: Mark Twain's Friend and Pastor*, demonstrates how Twichell's humanistic Christianity greatly influenced not only Twain's major literary works but his life in general.⁵ According to Strong, Twichell's open-minded and tolerant theological views were developed through his own close relationship with Dr. Horace Bushnell and by his battlefield

chaplaincy during the Civil War, a position he shared with a Jesuit priest. Twain described Twichell, a graduate of Yale and Andover Theological Seminary, as "one of the best of men, although a clergyman."

This offhanded remark, while appearing to dismiss the clergy with cynical irony, may in fact express Twain's conflicted feelings toward his own vocational stirrings to be a minister. While many of his more pious contemporaries labeled him a son of the devil, Twain confessed that his "only genuine ambition" was to be a preacher of the Gospel. His inability to stomach the profession's "necessary stock in trade" i.e. "religion," was apparently the only thing preventing him from pursuing this vocation.

The friction he felt between his calling as a Gospel preacher and his disdain for religion appears to be deeply rooted in the liberal and unorthodox religious thought percolating throughout his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. The Calvinistic Presbyterianism he learned in church as a boy was undermined by a variety of non-traditional religious thinking circulating within the community.⁷ In Twain's family alone there existed an intriguing diversity of religious experience. His father was a free-thinker and his uncle a Universalist. In his autobiography, Twain describes his mother as "saying a soft word for the devil himself...who prays for Satan?" Her great-grandson characterized her as taking "a fancy" to "anything queer about a religion or theory," while never actually converting to anything. Twain's brother Orion (named for the constellation) was excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church after denying the Bible's supernatural qualities; he subsequently joined and abandoned a number of other denominations. Their sister Pamela was "attracted to East Indian philosophies."

The conflict between what he learned in church and what he experienced at home may have contributed to the vocational crisis I believe Twain struggled with throughout his life. Interestingly, he saw his gift for writing humor as a calling too, even if it was one "of a low order." I would now like to demonstrate how this low literary vocation was inseparably intertwined with his higher spiritual calling. As an expression of his deeper spirituality, Twain's satirical deconstructions of traditional religion share the same spirit underlying the sermons many of his friends preached from the liberal pulpit. Three decades into his career as a humorist, for example, Twain observed that humor "must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever...I have always preached. That is the reason that I have lasted thirty years."⁸ Seen in this light, Twain's writings were not the irreligious potshots of a fallen angel but prophetic attempts to demolish the "shams and delusions" obstructing one's direct experience of the Divine.

Religious Liberalism and Mark Twain

Most religion, according to Twain, builds barriers that separate rather than bridges that unite humanity and God. He stated in his autobiography that

In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.

Deism was one of the earliest liberal influences that helped him examine his own spiritual undercurrent without the baggage of institutional religion. Twain read Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* during his younger years as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. Greatly impressed by Paine's critique of the Bible, Twain wrote "God of the Bible vs. God of the Present Day" in the 1870s. In it he contrasts the limitations of the imaginary biblical God with the "real" God whose Creation "appeals with its sublimity."⁹

Twain's personal statement of belief, written in the 1880's, includes obvious deistic beliefs, such as his belief in a "God Almighty" whose "universe is governed by strict and immutable laws." Rather than morality being imposed upon humanity through an otherworldly source, Twain believed "the world's moral laws are the outcome of the world's experience." Twain's involvement in Freemasonry, with its doctrine that all organized religions are ultimately distortions of one universal Truth, underscores his deistic assumption that "no line in the Bible was authorized by God, much less inspired by Him." At best, he saw the "stately Scriptural wording" of the Bible as a mere shadow of the "awful Presence" of God that Twain often experienced "pervading" nature. Finally, deism's emphasis on reason is evident in his conviction that "if man continues in the direction of enlightenment, his religious practice may, in the end, attain some semblance of human decency."¹⁰

Twain's emphasis here on the power of enlightened religion to humanize its adherents touches on another important theme of liberal religion in Twain's worldview: Higher Criticism's effort to take the "real Jesus" "back from the Christ of dogma."¹¹

Twain's opinion of Jesus ranged from reverence to critical (in one of his last works he accused Jesus of "becoming a Christian"); however, like most liberal Christians he always saw the deepest humanity of Jesus as inseparable from his godlike character. In fact, Twain seemed to place the same emphasis William Channing did on a Jesus who mingled with "us as a friend and a brother" even as he revealed to us our own potential for experiencing the "immortal flame which dwelt in himself."¹² In *The Innocents Abroad*, for instance, Twain sees the divinity of Jesus as an integral aspect of his human existence when he speculates about the relationship between Jesus and his brothers:

...Whoever inquires...whether they slept with Jesus...romped about with him; quarreled with him concerning toys and trifles; struck him in anger...what passed in their minds when they saw this brother, (who was *only* a brother to them, however much he might be to others a mysterious

stranger who was a god and stood face to face with God above the clouds?)...¹³

Arguably, as I will discuss later, this connection is perhaps the central theme of Twain's final novel *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, where the enigmatic title character may represent Twain's personal vision of how the humanity of Jesus ultimately reveals the ineffable reality of God.¹⁴

The significance of Jesus as man and its implications for ethical behavior in this world are most fully developed, however, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.¹⁵ In his masterpiece, I see Twain using liberalism's emphasis on the humanity of Jesus to subvert Southern religious doctrines which dehumanized African Americans in order to maintain the economic institution of slavery. The religious thinking of Huck's (and Twain's) culture elevated Jesus to an otherworldly status, assigning to him a supernatural character far removed from the "greatness of character" Channing saw uniting Jesus with the rest of humanity.¹⁶ A theology based on a superhuman Jesus found it easy enough to denigrate other human beings as subhuman. The liberal quest for the historical Jesus deflated such tendencies, refocusing the Christian's view from the lofty heights onto the more demanding moral example of Jesus as a man revealing Divinity's self-giving love through his humanity.¹⁷ Liberal theology's emphasis on the ethics of Jesus' earthly ministry can be seen motivating Huck's ironic rejection of a Christianity that would deny Jim's (and Jesus') basic humanity.

The passage in *Huckleberry Finn* which best illustrates this point is the crucial moment when Huck debates whether to turn his friend Jim in as a runaway slave (an act, incidentally, that Theodore Parker equated with Judas betraying Jesus). Huck is unable to betray Jim because, reminiscent of Bushnell's theology of mutuality, he has been profoundly transformed by Jim's nurturing friendship (De Voto 450). Huck's Sunday-school upbringing has conditioned him to believe that a supernatural God wills this loving human being remain enslaved simply because of his skin color; nonetheless, Huck chooses the self-sacrifice of going to hell rather than betray his friend. In refusing to do the religious thing, Huck unwittingly does the most Christlike thing. Huck's decision illustrates the triumph of the "spiritualized self," as Twain called it, over the societally conditioned conscience.¹⁸

Similarly, the influence abolitionism and even African-American spirituality had on Twain is also evident in *Huckleberry Finn*. Although born into a slave-owning family and culture, Twain went on to marry into a staunchly abolitionist family in the North that had aided fugitive slaves before the war. In addition to his relationship with antislavery ministers such as Henry Ward Beecher and Joseph Twichell, he befriended abolitionist luminaries such as Frederick Douglass and was committed to making reparations to former slaves.¹⁹

Still, the stigma of racism remains with Twain, in large part due to the allegedly racist language he used in *Huckleberry Finn*. Read within the historical context of post-Reconstruction America, however, such language offers an ironic, double-edged critique of race relations very much in line with antislavery sentiments. As forcefully as any abolitionist tract or sermon could do, Twain's ugly portrait of Huck's racist father Pap reveals the moral bankruptcy of white supremacist claims. In his drunken tirade against the "govment," Pap rants (De Voto 222 ff.):

There was a free nigger there from Ohio...They said he was a p'fessor in a college and could talk all kinds of languages and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote* when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn't too drunk to get there, but when they told me there was a state in this country where they'd let that nigger vote...I says I'll never vote agin.

Twain's involvement in abolitionist circles was not the obsequiousness of a Southern deserter kowtowing to the winning side, however. As a youth in the South, Twain had been deeply impressed by the subversive spirituality of African-American slave culture. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin convincingly argues, Twain's passion for "negro Spirituals...went to the core of his being; they spoke uniquely to a part of himself that no other art could touch." Additionally, Fishkin cites Twain's teenage memory of an "impudent and satirical...young black man--a slave" named Jerry who preached hilariously subversive sermons while working at his chores. According to Fishkin, Jerry's sermons, emerging from the unique African-American style of indirect, double-voiced satire known as "signifying," thrilled Twain. She demonstrates how he went on to borrow from such African-American folk traditions throughout his career as a humorist, particularly in *Huckleberry Finn*. They seem to have provided him with a way to develop and express his deeper spiritual vocation as well.

Twain's Later Years

Thus far I have attempted to show how various strands of liberal religious thought and unorthodox experience in nineteenth century America influenced and gave expression to Mark Twain's deepest religious impulse. With few exceptions, my focus has generally rested on his early years extending into the mid-1880's. While most scholars concur that Twain at least paid lip service to Christianity during these years, the critical consensus assumes that his last decade was marked by an "icy resignation" to a dark and shallow nihilism.²⁰ Supporting this view is the sad history of Twain's later years which. Marred by numerous personal tragedies, the last two decades of intense upheaval and grief obviously motivated his vehement attacks on God. These tirades launched against the Deity are frequently cited as evidence of Twain's embittered rejection of the Judeo-Christian faith; they also have been noted as examples of the "symbols of despair" many critics see permeating his final works.

I see these writings, however, as inseparable from the spiritual journey I've outlined above. Read within a theological framework, Twain's anger and seeming despair are strikingly similar common with themes found in the wisdom tradition of Judaism, particularly Job's anguished case against God.²¹ Rather than retreating into nihilistic solipsism during his later years, I see Mark Twain's vision expanding outward into a profound transcendence resembling Job's own journey into the Divine whirlwind. Just as Job's false notions of God painfully fell apart to reveal a direct experience of Divinity beyond theological hearsay, Twain's years of grief and disillusion can be characterized by his own ultimate absorption into a "wordless soul-communion" with Divinity.²²

Although critics have often portrayed his literary deconstructions of the Christian metanarrative as an embittered detonation of the universe, many of Twain's complex writings late in life indicate clear indications of a maturing Unitarian and Universalist belief system. Although the subject deserves a more thorough treatment than I can give here, I will limit my discussion to a brief overview of how two of these later works exhibit the following basic themes common to early Unitarianism and Universalism: universal salvation, reason, anti-trinitarianism, free will, and transcendentalism.²³

Universalist views are unquestionably evident in the early part of Twain's life and writing. Aside from his uncle's involvement with Universalism, Twain himself espoused a belief in universal salvation as early as 1870 in response to a Christian minister's complaint about the "bad smells" of working class parishioners. In his biting retort Twain informs the minister that those who will go to heaven include not only laborers but "negroes, and Esquimaux, and Tierra del Fuegians, and Arabs, and a few Indians, and possibly even some Spaniards and Portuguese. All things are possible with God." This optimistic Universalism was still very much in evidence forty years later in "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," written at a time when Twain was allegedly lost in despair. In his satire of literalist interpretations of the Bible's "figurative language" about eternity, Twain imagines heaven as a place where all life throughout the universe is welcome. Although the Christian promise of Divine grace is acknowledged, there is no indication that belief in Jesus is required for entrance through eternity's gates.²⁴

Further evidence that Twain remained rooted in his spiritual vocation is found throughout Twain's last full-length novel *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*. Posthumously published by the Mark Twain Project in 1969, this text remains one of his most controversial and misunderstood works.²⁵ While many critics still view *No. 44* in terms of the satanic aura surrounding the title character, I see this corrected version as a profoundly theological (albeit unorthodox) exploration of the ways in which Twain understood and ultimately experienced a Divine reality beyond the clouds of religious doctrine and metaphor. In this approach to the Divine Twain shared much in common with the Unitarian worldview.

Unitarian tenets of reason, anti-trinitarianism, free will, and transcendentalism are expressed throughout *No. 44*. The importance of reason and the rejection of Trinitarian views are key themes developed throughout the text. Early on (pp. 4-5), for example, a "Hussite" woman is attacked by the traditional church for preaching what she calls "God's *real* message," which "only the intelligent could understand." While this may appear elitist, the narrator admits earlier that "the priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people" who were instead "trained" to be obedient to Church and monarchy. The woman preacher challenges the established order by encouraging her followers to think for themselves and to worship the one true God. When an intolerant priest asks one of the woman's followers whether they worship the Virgin, for instance, the adherent replies, "No--only God." Later (pp. 113-114), in one of the book's many theological dialogues (another UU trait!), the ultimate spiritual consequences created by this inability of limited human conditioning to perceive the Infinite without dividing it up are addressed:

You see, for your race there is such a thing as time--you cut it up and measure it; to your race there is a past, a present and a future--out of one and same thing you make *three*...If [the human imagination] only had *some* capacity, some depth, or breadth, or--or--but you see it doesn't *hold* anything; one cannot pour the starred and shoreless expanses of the universe into a jug!

It is through the ultimate dissolution of the "jug" of human consciousness by book's end that Twain conveys the final two elements of Unitarianism: free will and transcendentalism. Both tenets are found in the complex and apocalyptic final chapters (pp. 176 ff.) where time implodes to a point before Adam and "the Missing Link." The narrator and Forty-Four suddenly find themselves in "an empty and soundless world" where nothing exists. The apparent nihilism of the abrupt ending is often cited as evidence of Twain's own despair at the end of his life. However, when read as what Judith Hoehler called "the spontaneous communion of the human soul with the transcendent," an event to which all the book's preceding chapters appear to be prologue, the ending may imply that these characters have entered the realm Joseph Campbell called "that which is beyond all concepts."²⁶

As the last chapter closes, all fictions, including "God," dissolve into nothingness; rather than perceiving this dissolution as Twain's nihilism, though, it may instead represent Twain shattering the "jug" of consciousness that separates humanity from the "shoreless expanses" of the Divine.²⁷ The narrator, in other words, is now in total communion with Divine "Thought," beyond the concepts representing it. Rather than sinking selfishly into himself, he has expanded outward into the thinking "Presence" of God with which Twain opens *Letters From the Earth*.²⁸ His absorption into the primordial Divine source liberates his free will now to "dream other dreams, and better!"

With his power to create new realities out of shoreless eternity, August is an heir of the Creator; however, along with this glorious power, comes suffering as well (cf. Rom. 8:16b-17). Hence, he is "forlorn" and wandering the vastness of eternity, sharing with avatars throughout time the burden and the glory of a divinely inspired identity.

Conclusion

According to Sara deSaussure Davis, Americans have raised Mark Twain to "the level of myth, where he embodies our idea of ourselves."²⁹ His enduring mythic importance is rooted in his extraordinary talent to intuit a deeper, universal level of human experience and express it in a uniquely American voice. I believe the themes and insights of the liberal religious movement of his day provided him with the concepts and language he needed to discern and translate that crucial experience.

The mythic importance Twain holds for religious liberals today is that he provides a bridge between the spiritual truths of an age of faith in America and the current secularized era. He was a fiercely independent skeptic who nonetheless sought throughout his life a "religion that comes of thought, and study, and deliberate conviction." His contemplative quest was modern in that he struggled most of his life to discern that "one microscopic atom in me that is truly *me*," yet this search ultimately led him to the ray of Universal Intelligence uniting our deepest humanity with God.³⁰

Notes

¹ Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Notebook*, prepared for publication by Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper and Row, 1935) 328.

² This summation is derived from the following sources: Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography*; Bernard De Voto, "The Symbols of Despair;" and Roger B. Saloman, "Escape as Nihilism: The Mysterious Stranger." In addition to my 1997 master's thesis (Georgetown U), scholarship addressing Twain and religion has not always concluded that he was anti-God. See Phillip S. Foner; Alexander Elvin Jones; Kenneth R. Andrews; Leah A. Strong; Sholom J. Kahn; Stanley Brodwin; and Jason Gary Horn.

³ Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements*, vol. 2.

⁴ Phillip S. Foner, *Mark Twain: Social Critic*.

⁵ Leah A. Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell: Mark Twain's Friend and Pastor*.

⁶ Stanley Brodwin, "Mark Twain's Theology: The Gods of Brevet Presbyterian," in *Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, ed. Forrest G. Robinson.

⁷ Alexander Elvin Jones, *Mark Twain and Religion*, diss., U Minnesota, 1950.

⁸ Kaplan 123.

⁹ Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough (eds.), *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, Appendix 7.

¹⁰ Mark Twain, *A Pen Warmed-Up in Hell: Mark Twain in Protest*, ed. Frederick Anderson.

¹¹ Dermot A. Lane, *The Reality of Jesus*.

¹² I am indebted to Alfred P. Stiernotte's discussion of the theological significance of Jesus in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, "Christology and Unitarian Universalists." In *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, vols. 51 and 52, 1996-1997.

¹³ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin.

¹⁴ Dwayne E. Eutsey, "Mark Twain's Attitudes Toward Religion: Sympathy for the Devil or Radical Christianity?" In *Religion and Literature* (31:2), summer 1999.

¹⁵ Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in *The Portable Mark Twain*, ed. Bernard De Voto. All numbered references in parentheses correspond to it.

¹⁶ Stiernotte 73.

¹⁷ Marvin C. Shaw, "The Test of the Search Is in What We Find: Religious Humanism, Universal Theism, and Liberal Christianity." In *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, vols. 51 and 52, 1996-1997.

¹⁸ For a good discussion of Twain's notions of conscience in *Huckleberry Finn*, see Jason Gary Horn, *Mark Twain and William James: Crafting a Free Self*, Chapter 1.

¹⁹ For an intriguing exploration of Twain's relationships with African-Americans, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*.

²⁰ The phrase "icy resignation" is from Hamlin Hill's *Mark Twain: God's Fool*.

²¹ Eutsey Georgetown thesis, Chapter 3.

²² Although Twain uses "wordless soul-communion" in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* in reference to interpersonal love, it's obvious he also sees such communion possible beyond the personal; cf. 100-101. For an excellent analysis of the possible theological implications the story of Job has within a postmodern context, see Paul Lakeland's *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*.

²³ I derive these themes from Marvin Shaw's essay.

²⁴ Mark Twain, "About Smells," *In A Pen Warmed Up in Hell*. "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," in *The Bible According to Mark Twain*.

²⁵ See William H. Gibson, *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, 1-34. Dismissing the previously published version of the *Mysterious Stranger* (1916) as "bogus," Gibson's 1969 version, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, promotes itself as "the only authentic text." Henceforth, I use the Gibson version for my entire discussion; all numbered references in parentheses correspond to pages in it.

²⁶ Judith L. Hoehler, "The Unitarian Universalist Dilemma," in *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, vols. 51 and 52, 1996-1997. Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers.

²⁷ This disintegration of ego and form is, of course, universal throughout all mystical religious experience. Compare with the insight of 13th century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi: "I've lost the thread of the story I was telling/...Narrative, poetics, destroyed, my body,/a dissolving, a return." In *The Essential Rumi*, p. 14.

²⁸ Mark Twain, *Letters From the Earth*, in his 1909 *What Is Man?*

²⁹ Sara deSaussure Davis and Phillip D. Beidler, *The Mythologizing of Mark Twain*.

³⁰ The quote on intelligent religion is from a letter written by Mark Twain, 1868. The quote on searching for his authentic self is from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The phrase "ray of Universal Intelligence" is from Titus Burckhardt's excellent *Introduction to Sufism*.

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