Twain's 'Reflections'

Pseudo-faith Indicted

"If I really do by God His Grace fall asleep, I shall be . . ."

(Last words scribbled by Mark Twain)

America has never, before his time or since, so cordially taken a writer to its heart as the author of "Tom Sawyer," "Huckleberry Finn," and "The Prince and the Pauper." George Bernard Shaw was quite sure that he was one of the two greatest writers our country had produced (the other was Edgar Allan Poe); indeed, his career could be symbolized very well by the brilliance of Halley's comet, on the tail of which he had often, in fact, claimed to have entered the world.

In his lifetime, Mark Twain dazzled two continents. Private railroad cars were placed at his disposal, customs officials passed his luggage through without inspection, policemen would stop or divert traffic at his passing by, the mighty and influential flocked to his door, newsmen found copy in the smallest details of his personal life.

As a journalist, man of the world, adventurer, lecturer, novelist, and above all as a humorist without equal, Mark Twain won the plaudits of his time to such an extent that his name was even suggested as a candidate for the presidency!

When he died, tributes poured in from all over the world for the man whom Rudyard Kipling called the "great and godlike Clemens," whose literary efforts would some day, according to the editor of the "Atlantic Monthly," bring him to "bask in the same light as Cervantes and William Shakespeare." Everyone, young and old, felt that they had lost a friend. Everyone mourned him, for he had made them laugh, and he had made them think, and they loved him for it.

For three generations, Americans have enjoyed the literary legacy of Mark Twain. Such of it, that is, as they knew existed. All his life, it would seem, Twain toyed with the idea of writing an autobiography; at times he would write, or later dictate, furiously; at other times in his life he seemed to lose interest. When he died, a vast amount of papers remained unpublished, and nothing like the whole of that material has yet found its way out of manuscript.

Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's companion during the last years of his life, published segments according to his instructions in 1924, with the title "Mark Twain's Autobiography"; in 1940 Bernard De Voto's "Mark Twain in Eruption" appeared, containing a great deal that Paine had hesitated to print; and in August of 1959 the latest "autobiography," that of Charles Neider, was printed. Each compiler offered sections, more or less coherently arranged, of the papers Twain left at his death. Each one followed a somewhat different principle for deciding what should be included and what omitted. De Voto's other collections of scattered papers were bound under the titles "Letters from the Earth" (a best seller in 1962, when it was reprinted, for eighteen weeks), and "Papers of the Adam Family."

Last month, Mark Twain made headlines again. On October 15, the "Hudson Review" published still another segment under the editorial title "Reflections on Religion."

The "Reflections" are in fact five short chapters of the humorist's projected autobiography, dictated by Twain in late June, 1906, while he was staying in a rented house in New Hampshire. He had announced previously his intention of writing something "as caustic, fiendish, and devilish as possible," designed "to make peoples' hair stand on end." The result is now revealed to be an amalgam of blasphemous commentary on the Old Testament, parodies of Christ's motives and Christian history, and wild distortions of the human condition.

Each chapter vies with its predecessor in crude vilification of Christianity. The "Reflections" range from assertions of Twain's rather simple, deterministic philosophy ("Man is a machine and God made it, without invitation from anyone." "Man is not to blame for what he is . . . he has no will . . . he is as purely a piece of automatic mechanism as is a watch . . ."); to comic exegesis (God's telling the first man he would "die" was equivalent to telling him he'd be "transformed into a meridian of longitude"); to theological howlers (the author insists that the Immaculate Conception could not be repeated in the New York of his day. Twain actually meant the birth of Our Lord; to the end of his days he had never been able to grasp the difference between the two doctrines.); to black despair ("Ours is a terrible religion. The fleets of the world could swim in spacious comfort in the innocent blood it has spilt.") Twain expresses considerable doubt about the existence of heaven, but he is quite sure of the reality of hell which no one will escape, "no matter what he does."

On the day after he had finished the "Reflections," Twain wrote from New York City to a friend, "I have been dictating some fearful things, for four successive mornings—for no eyes but yours to see until I have been dead a century—it then. But I got them out of my system, where they have been festering for years—and that is the main thing. I feel better now." Premature publication would, he feared, lead to his heirs' being burned alive. Two chapters bear the author's notation "not to be exposed to any human eye until the edition of A.D. 2406."

Twain might have saved himself the elaborate precautions. No one has yet suggested burning his heirs alive, and the foretold shock of this village atheism has caused as little reaction as did his other prophecies.

He had solemnly announced, for example on various occasions, his conviction that in the generation after his death the United States would be ruled by a king, that Christian Scientists would dominate American political life by 1940, that the world would soon quake with the discovery that Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays, that the peace treaty ending the Russo-Japanese War would turn out to be "the worst conspicuous disaster in political history," and that 1000 years from his day the murder of the Empress of Austria (whose funeral had dazzled him) would still be on everyone's lips and the novels of William Dean Howell would be "as common as Bibles."

The last two of these predictions are, of course, still in doubt. But it appears that the consumate humorist was in fact a very bad prophet.

What had happened to the great American humorist?

No simple answer is possible for the tragic religious disillusionment of this giant of American letters; a variety of events and attitudes, however, suggest themselves as at least partial reasons.

Few of us today realize the impact of the grim Calvinistic frontier religion in which Twain was brought up. His mother, Jane Clemens, was a kind woman, but very strict in her views; in later years he summed up the results of her teaching as to "fear God and dread the Sunday school."

When Tom Sawyer squirms in church before the type of sermon that "dealt in limitless fire and brimstone and thinned the elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving," one can imagine the young Mark Twain also writhing in a front pew. He had nightmares about the Bible, his "trained Presbyterian conscience" haunted him all his life, and he once claimed that "the most earnest ambition" he ever had was to be a preacher, but he thought he would surely save his soul that way.

It is hard to overestimate the influence of childhood training in a religion of anguish and torture on a soul like Twain's. Ironically, this very belief in the depravity of mankind, was the one to which he would return, for quite different reasons, at the end of his days. Until he died, Mark Twain's God was a little boy's God, created by his childish imagination in middle border Sunday schools, an attacked with the fury that only a frightened little boy can feel.

The Hannibal of his boyhood, for all its pious Christian veneer and moralizing, was no different from other Southern villages of the ante-bellum era: the same people who embroidered "God Bless Our Home" for parlor decorations and delighted in naming their children after Old Testament heroes both tolerated, and participated in, human slavery!

The finest statement of Twain's rejection of what he had been led to believe was Christianity can be found in Huck Finn's letter to Mrs. Watson, betraying the whereabouts of her runaway slave Jim. Huck had helped Jim escape, and his conscience tormented him. He was "stealing" the property of a woman who had never done him any harm! Huck finally tore up the letter with the "awful thoughts and awful words," "All right, then I'll go to hell."

Many of his most savage satires in later years were aimed at piously masquerading as religion. When the Rev. T. De Witt Talmage decided that "one half of Christendom" would be "sick at their stomach" at the smell from "mixing up of the common people with the uncommon," Twain rises to the heights of eloquence against him: "If the subject of these remarks had been among the original twelve Apostles, he would not have associated with the rest; because he could not have stood the fishy smell . . ." And when the Rev. William Hayne Levell's defense of "the seeming necessity for" lynching Negroes, chiefly as a deterrent for rape, brought from his pen in 1901 the blazing "United States of Lyncherdom." "O kind missionary, O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians!" This was the age, incidentally, when Taft's failure to attend church regularly placed his campaign for the presidency in grave danger, until his former minister published a testimonial to the effect that he had once appeared as a fairy in a church social!

To what precise extent this sort of pious hypocrisy contributed to, or was caused by, the pseudo-Christian religious climate in which Twain lived, will probably never be measured. But this is quite certain: the burlesque of Christianity in which he indulged are only comprehensible in the light of what he took Christianity to be; and the responsibility for the religious vacuum of his last days is not completely his own.

The real horror of Mark Twain's blasphemies lies at least in part, in the fact that he was kept from the love of God by the very institutions that should have led him to it.

—Father Thomas Hotton
St. Andrew's Seminary

'Tribulations' Of East Berlin

Berlin — (RNS)—Pope Paul VI, in a special message received here, invoked spiritual comfort for East Berlin Roman Catholics in all their "present tribulations."

The occasion was the consecration by Archbishop Alfred Bengsch, Bishop of Berlin, of the high altar of the rebuilt St. Hedwig's Cathedral, the main church of the diocese. The diocese embraces both West and East Berlin and areas within the East German Soviet Zone.

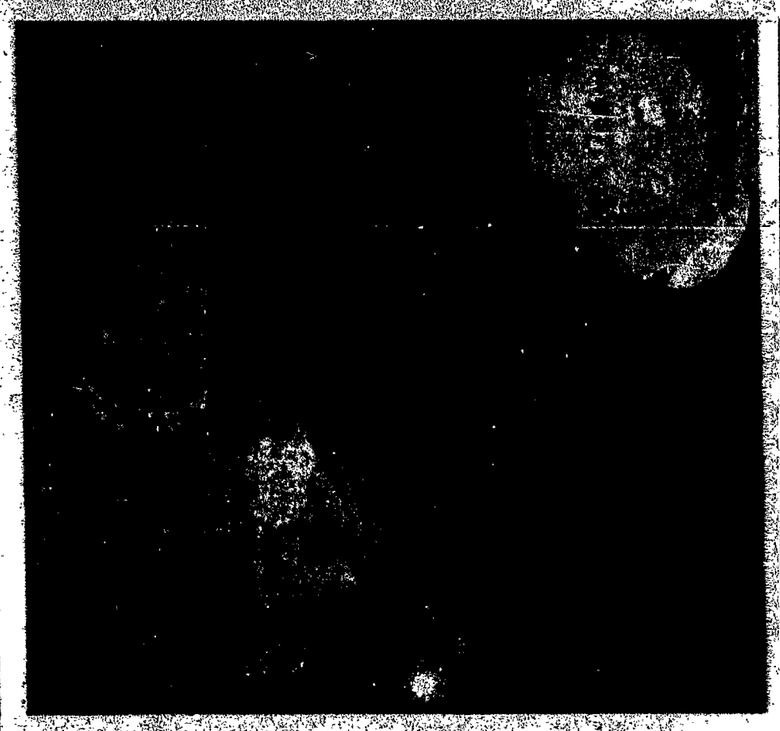
Referring in his message to the fact that the altar was being consecrated in the name of the Holy Cross, Pope Paul voiced the prayer that it might "give the faithful of Berlin spiritual comfort and the strength to bear all present tribulations in the light of the faith."

Deacons Named To Parishes

St. Louis—(NC)—Joseph Cardinal Ritter has directed fourth-year theologians in St. Louis diocesan seminaries to "get out into the field" for broader pastoral experience.

The direction came after 32 young men were ordained as deacons last month. They are scheduled to be ordained to the priesthood next spring. The 32 have been given weekend assignments to parishes in the St. Louis area. They will teach, preach, baptize and help distribute Communion at Sunday Masses.

Creation of a permanent diaconate (which is quite different from the present St. Louis arrangement) was approved by the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council Oct. 30 in areas where local bishops feel it necessary.



Check Presented To Pastor

PRESENTATION of a check for $621.88 from the Rosary and Altar Society of St. Patrick's Church, Seneca Falls, for sanctuary needs featured 24th annual banquet at Gould Hotel. Here Rev. John P. O'Beirne, pastor receives the check from Mrs. Leona Baert, retiring president.

Crime Rate Climbs

Too Much Tolerance

Washington — (RNS) — Excessive tolerance by parents, law officials, and juries is a root cause of increased crime both in the capital and throughout the nation, Lewis F. Powell Jr., president-elect of the American Bar Association, said here.

"We live in an age of excessive tolerance," said the Richmond, Va. attorney, "a kind of tolerance which accepts, if not affirmatively condones, levels of conduct and attitudes towards personal responsibility which are marginal or clearly in terms of the welfare of society and ourcountry."

In the home this tolerance is manifested by permission for early drinking, unregulated automobile use, uncontrolled absences from home at night, and unsupervised reading and television viewing, Mr. Powell held.

"The other side of this coin is parental failure to assume affirmative responsibility for a child's education, his moral and ethical standards, and his respect for law and the rights of others," he added.

Speaking before Washington's Rotary Club, Mr. Powell said that tolerance is normally a virtue—when it expresses itself as full respect for the rights and opinions of others. But tolerance is no longer a virtue, he said, when it allows "substandard marginal and even immoral and unlawful conduct."

There is too much of the latter kind of tolerance among today's public, he asserted, and "an inevitable by-product of this excessive tolerance is lack of respect — for authority, for law, and for the rights of others."

He cited as examples of excessive tolerance by juries cases involving automobile accidents and obscene publications. The result is that police are discouraged from enforcing laws in these areas, he said.

Reds Ignore Prelate's Visit

London — (RNS) — Communist newspapers in Poland have been conspicuously silent regarding a recent special audience given by Pope Paul VI to Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski and 25 other Polish bishops attending the Second Vatican Council, according to informed Catholic sources here.

The apparent explanation, they said, was that the Warsaw authorities were taken aback by the unusual warmth shown by the Pope toward his Polish guests, and particularly by his words praising them for the "patience and perseverance" they had displayed in defending the faith in their homeland.

In his talk, Pope Paul lauded the Polish Primate and his fellow bishops for their "disregard of the many difficulties placed in your path."

These remarks, the sources here said, were obviously taken as a direct "attack" on the Warsaw regime and an encouragement to the bishops in their struggle against communism.

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