

Was Mark Twain a Christian or an Atheist?
Comments on Uenishi Tetsuo's
Modernization and Christianity in the United States
—Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as a Case Study—

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Some scholars and many readers regard Mark Twain as an atheist. Justin Kaplan, a biographer, writes “He never became a Christian” (80). Mark Twain was occasionally even called an infidel. But, as Prof. Uenishi shows us in his presentation, *Huckleberry Finn* is full of Christian allusion, which finally criticizes the contemporary bigoted Christianity and had roots in Nook Farm, the “progressive” Christian community Mark Twain belonged to in Hartford. Certainly Hartford is crucial, but I am wondering what brought Twain to Hartford. Tracing back his religious experience, we can not dismiss another religious community, Elmira, New York. I will note Twain’s apparent conversion in Elmira, especially focusing on racial interpretation of Christianity. I would like to look over Prof. Uenishi’s discussion from another point of view, where the concept of civil religion could be a key to understanding Twain’s religious notion and his contemporary Christianity, and which might, partly, help reinforce Prof. Uenishi’s conclusion.

Prof. Uenishi reveals Huck’s growth as a Christian in *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck’s religious growth is traced back to Mark Twain’s own conversion to Christianity, especially in terms of racial relations. Mark Twain grew up in a small frontier town in a slave state: Hannibal, Missouri. This is, as Prof. Uenishi said, the place where the Hannibal Presbyterian Church denied the abolitionist policy of the National Synod of the New School Presbyterians. Mark Twain, as a boy, had racial prejudice permeated in his community. His first extant letter from New York reveals his mind on races. Soon after he left the town for the first time, he wrote his mother that he encountered “the infernal abolitionists” and missed “old-fashioned” slave culture. He even wrote jokingly that, “I reckon I had better black my face” (1: 4, 29), noticing that some African-Americans in a free state had better jobs than the whites. His belief in the inferiority of African-Americans still remained during the next decade, while he was in the far west of the States. It is not until he met Olivia Langdon and went to the East that Mark Twain underwent a drastic change in racial concept, which was a particular interpretation of theology.

Olivia Clemens was most influential on Mark Twain’s religious habits, not to

say, on his religious concepts. Prior to becoming engaged, Livy refused Twain's proposal for 6 months. This highly religious woman needed to reform him first so that he would be acceptable to her family. In Twain's words, "she set herself the task of making a Christian of me. I said she w'd succeed, but that in the meantime she w'd dig a matrimonial pit & end by tumbling into it" (3: 85). Twain obediently followed her advice and was making much effort to become a Christian as she wished. She kept sending him copies of the *Plymouth Pulpit*, a periodical which featured Henry Ward Beecher's sermons. Henry Ward Beecher was, as Prof. Uenishi said, an outspoken abolitionist in those days and the Plymouth Church was a sanctuary for fleeing slaves after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1855.

Olivia was born into and raised in the Langdon family, an outstanding religious family in Elmira. Jarvis Langdon, her father, grew up in a New School Presbyterian church and moved to Elmira in 1845. Just after his settlement in Elmira, he and other Presbyterians formed the Independent Congregational Church, which proclaimed the anti-slavery principle in its bylaws. Jarvis Langdon was a leading Christian in that religious anti-slavery movement. Frederick Douglass was one of hundreds of fugitives on their escape to Canada who were given lodging and funding at the church under the influence of Mr. Langdon. Douglass later expressed his appreciation in his letter to Mrs. Langdon. William Garrison and other abolitionists were welcomed in the Langdons' parlor when they visited Elmira to make speeches on the rights of African-Americans. The Langdons were the core family in an anti-slavery culture of Elmira.

Under the strong religious influence of Olivia, Twain made a conversion from pro-slavery to anti-slavery in Elmira. This conversion, as you see, leads Huck's famous "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (271) episode. After their wedding they lived in Buffalo, New York, but Olivia wanted to move to a religious community such as Hartford. While residing in Hartford, they spent summers in Elmira. Becoming part of the Langdon family, his prejudices on race drastically faded out. The Langdons attended the Independent Congregational Church, which was established mainly by Jarvis Langdon himself and was called simply Park Church, transcending sectarianism later in 1871.

Park Church is essential to understanding Mark Twain's religious conversion as well as the Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford. Thomas K. Beecher, the half-brother of Henry Ward Beecher, was called to be the pastor of Park Church in 1854. Unlike the oratorical style of Henry Ward Beecher's sermons, Thomas preferred a more frank and friendly style and attracted a large congregation from all denominations and even freethinkers like Twain. He did not draw a line between in and out of the church, believing, "Preaching never really converts anyone, but living does" (MR 93). He seems to have been a bit different from the Nook Farm intellectuals. He became one of Twain's best friends and Twain became a faithful attendant at the church during summers. Park Church contributed much to social justice and welfare in the community,

free from religious sectionalism. Thomas Beecher and his wife Julia, Twain's closest friends in Elmira, nourished his Christian humanitarianism.

Elmira, where many liberated slaves chose to settle after the emancipation, had such a multi-racial culture that some African-Americans worked in the household management at the Quarry Farm, his summer residence. Twain's racial prejudice was erased and his belief in racial equality was revealed in his first *Atlantic Monthly* article, "A True Story". Rachel, an ex-slave, narrates the story with her African-American dialect. Twain was indebted for his success in the short story to Mary Ann Cord, an elderly cook at the farm. She never forgot the experience of being sold in Richmond, separated from her husband and seven children. At the auction, her youngest boy said to her, "I gwyne to run away, an' den I work an' buy yo' freedom" (MR 165). In fact he escaped and settled in Elmira, finding his mother in North Carolina. She conveyed her emotion of how miserable she felt from never seeing any of her family except one and how blissful from the miracle of seeing her youngest son again. Twain, inspired by this story, produced "A True Story." He revealed his deep sympathy to her agony as a slave.

Looking back at his racial prejudice later in his life, Twain confessed: "Ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chukleheadness—and almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all. That is what I was at nineteen or twenty" (MTL 289). In a sense, he was one of the backward and bigoted people when he was young. In the progressive Christian communities like Elmira and Hartford, he grew to understand that Christianity is not of one face regarding slavery. The abolitionists and the slaveholders were both inspired by the Bible, but they quoted different texts. The abolitionists of the progressive church in the northern states were influenced by the verses that Quakers in Pennsylvania had inscribed on the Liberty Bell at the beginning of the antislavery movement: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25.10). It reminds me of Martin Luther King's repeated phrase "Let freedom ring" in his "I have a dream" speech.

Becoming a national novelist, Twain made many contributions to African-Americans, like scholarships at Lincoln University. He regarded it as a moral obligation of his race that had treated them so inhumanely. He wrote: "we have ground the manhood out of them and the shame is ours, not theirs, and we should pay for it" (MR 163). He was enhanced much above the racism of his time. The New England progressive Christianity nurtured his deep humanitarianism and sharpened his critical consciousness against social injustice, though did not endow the salvation of soul nor promises of an afterlife to him. It is certain that especially in his later years he, dictating many phrases that showed his contempt for belief in God, was regarded as an atheist, but surely he learned much from the liberal Christians around him. Depending on the definition, Twain can be a Christian or an atheist, but according to the concept of civil religion as Dr. Spillers defined it, he was a Christian.

Prof. Uenishi's personal issue of relating to Christians who are also bigoted is interesting and he could have developed that issue fully to connect to his main theme if he had more time for his presentation. Perhaps we can address it in the following discussion.

Works Cited

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