Harold K. Bush, Jr. ***Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age.*** Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. 340p.

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Atheism is currently big business in book publishing; recent bestsellers include Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* and *The Portable Atheist*, Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, Victor Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis*. Hitchens includes Mark Twain among the writers collected in *The Portable Atheist*, and it has long been a commonplace in Twain studies that Twain was a lukewarm Christian during most of his life and, after the deaths of his beloved daughter Susy and his wife Livy, spent his last decade a bitter, misanthropic atheist. In *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age*, Harold Bush challenges the assumption that Twain was a lapsed believer. He calls the book a "cultural biography" of Twain's "religious ethos" and intends to correct this common misconception about America's most famous author (2).

There is no doubt that Twain exhibited some religious propensities in his early years, especially as he was courting Olivia Langdon. Most biographers and critics, however, contend that Twain's Christianity in this period was greatly exaggerated—produced for rhetorical effect or to impress Livy and her parents. Furthermore, they claim that in his later years, grief turned him against God. Hamlin Hill, especially, in *Mark Twain, God's Fool*, helped establish the critical vision of Twain as man bereft of spiritual convictions. Since then, a generation of scholars has assumed a picture of Twain that matches Hill's hypothesis.

Bush claims, to the contrary, that Twain's spiritual seeking was sincere and life-long, although not free of problems; he further contends that Twain's religious wanderings were paralleled by the national spiritual crisis of the late nineteenth century. He claims that Twain's criticisms of Christianity were criticisms of the church and its hypocrisy, not criticisms of religion itself. Twain's late tale, "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," for instance, is often read as an indictment of belief in the afterlife. Bush, however, claims that Twain uses the story to "demythologize" Heaven because the contemporary perception of Heaven offers a picture of God that is "not transcendent enough" (123-124).

Bush doesn't claim Twain is Christian as much as he argues Twain is "Christian-like." He invokes the concept of shalom, or the "way Christianity ought to be" (70-72), as an implied precept for Twain's life and writing. He says Twain, under the influence of Joe Twichell, his life-long friend and pastor in Hartford, was greatly stimulated by the social Christianity movement. According to Bush, Twain saw social Christianity as the practical manifestation of a theoretical "Christian code"

that is the only moral code individuals might possibly live under (159). The key for Bush is not to paint Twain as some kind of evangelical, but to "strike a balance" between an understanding of Twain's critique of religion and his Christian-like propensities (151).

The book has many strengths, not the least of which its unique perspective on a difficult subject. Certainly, Bush's alternative viewpoint concerning Twain's spirituality is not the consensus within Twain studies, but he presents his minority viewpoint with care and assurance. Bush is obviously well-versed in things Twain and has done some valuable research about the spiritual issues of late nineteenth-century America. In fact, the whole project is very well researched. Twain scholarship runs long and deep, and Bush's foray into it is meticulous. He draws frequently from Twain's letters and the numerous biographies that have followed Albert Paine's initial effort. The included material on Twain's relationship with Joe Twichell, a relationship that Bush feels has been given short shrift in Twain studies, offers new insights and a more detailed portrait of the friendship than existing criticism.

Bush's analysis of Twain's final years is especially helpful: the years that most critics have written off (or embraced) as grief-ridden and atheistic. Bush acknowledges that Twain was emotionally damaged by a constant state of mourning during this period, but instead of focusing on the ways in which Twain's losses fueled his skepticism, he focuses on how Twain's grief may have prompted "traces of a purely religious fervor" (271). He offers a careful reading of Twain's poetic tributes to Susy after her death, seeing them as faithful to the sentimental tradition of sympathy. He points out that Twain was attracted to the sentimental "funeral poetry" of James Whitcomb Riley, which he recited in several public forums over the years (240-241), and his reading insists that these poems depict a man in touch with his spiritual side, not ostracized from it.

Since Bush's focus is biography, he doesn't offer close analysis of any of the major works, although he deftly works through a number of Twain's minor writings; he discusses well over seventy distinct pieces, often presenting alternatives to the standard readings. Without going into great detail in regard to any of them, he makes clear how his vision of Twain's spirituality might affect our understanding of his writing; he points out, for instance, that the "irreverent lampoons" in *Innocents Abroad* are balanced with "moments of strong sentimentality" that are often overlooked (81).

Bush's argument holds to a coherent trajectory over the course of the narrative, but in small ways the book seems to lack continuity from one chapter to another. Each chapter is tightly organized, but some ideas are repeated from chapter to chapter without attention to precedence. A paragraph about the purpose of gargoyles on a church, for instance, is repeated almost verbatim later in the book (69-70, 225).

Each appearance is contextualized within the discussion, but it seems strange that the second appearance would not make reference to or build upon the first. In another example of this trend, Bush briefly mentions the theological concept of Pelagianism, a romantic view of human nature, in Chapters 2 and 3, before defining it and explaining how he will use it in Chapter 6 (69, 94, 209). It seems more logical to define such a heavy theological term the first time it enters the discussion, not the last. These continuity issues do not really detract from the overall success of Bush's argument, but they are puzzling nonetheless. Despite this minor shortcoming, *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age* is a major contribution to the understanding of Twain and his work. It is carefully researched, elegantly written, and worthy of inclusion in every library of Twain scholarship. ❊