Susan K. Harris. *God's Arbiters: Americans and the Philippines, 1898-1902.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 288 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974010-9.

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A Special Mission: Religion and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines

"When I … realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them.… I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance.… And one night late it came to me." The seeker in the West Wing was President William McKinley, who offered this account of his late night deliberations over the Philippines around 1900. If he is to be believed, McKinley's decision on the Pacific islands–"to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them"–was no mere policy decision; it was beyond politics. It was, he implied, the very will of God.

McKinley's recollection serves as one of two epigraphs in *God's Arbiters* by Susan K. Harris, Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Kansas. Her other epigraph invokes Mark Twain, a convert to anti-imperialism, who seized on the contradictions between avowals of benevolence and U.S. imperial deeds, and forged these inconsistencies into barbed satirical poems and stories. Harris draws on Twain, McKinley, U.S. congressmen, novelists, poets, and other participants in debates on annexation to explore understandings of the role of the United States in the world and formations of American national identity at the turn of the century more broadly. Harris examines what she calls the "American narratives" that shaped these debates, their historical production, and the reception of U.S. words and actions by peoples around the world–Brits, like Rudyard Kipling; Latin Americans, like Rubén Darío; and Filipino nationalists, like Apolinario Mabini.

As her epigraphs suggest, Harris emphasizes the religious ideologies expressed in debates over imperialism and shows how both proponents and opponents of imperialism drew on late nineteenth-century incarnations of "manifest destiny." "No matter what position they defended," Harris writes, U.S. commentators "believed that the United States was a nation of white Protestants under a special mandate from God to represent freedom and fair dealing to the rest of the world" (p. 13). If for McKinley, the Philippine-American War was an expression of divine will to spread the blessings of liberty, for Twain, who repurposed the jeremiad to critique the conflict, it became a sign of the nation's fall from grace.

To Harris, religious imagery and rhetoric were not all talk. "Religion, in tandem with race and commerce, was a major factor in Americans' deliberations over their national obligations regarding the Philippines," she argues. "The idea of the United States as a Christian nation is intricately tied into Americans' understanding of their national history, identity, and mission" (p. 30). And so if Kristin Hoganson interprets the Philippine-American War as a war for "American manhood" (*Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* [1998]), and Paul Kramer views it in terms of race (*Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* [2006]), Harris emphasizes religious ideology. We might further situate Harris within a growing subfield of literature on imperialism, which has taken up the imperial entanglements of religious organizations, networks, and missionaries, as in Ian Tyrell's *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (2010) and the collection of essays edited by Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shemo, *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960* (2010).

Harris's own book is organized into three sections. The first, "American Narratives," identifies the religious (i.e., Protestant) and racial (i.e., white) underpinnings of U.S. citizenship and identity in the late nineteenth century. "Cleanliness, orderliness, honesty, and self-

control," Harris writes, "became the leitmotifs of 'true' American character, and these practices were believed to be rooted in Protestant values" (p. 51). These were also the virtues and hallmarks of civilization to be imparted to the benighted peoples of the Philippines, once anti-imperialists, like Twain, had lost their case.

Harris's second chapter takes up the contradictions of this imperial ideology: "Imagining itself within a mythic national history that credited the country's material success on its unique fusions of Enlightenment and Protestant thought, [the United States] incorporated an evangelical mission to broadcast its formula to the rest of the world. At the same time, its own racial ideologies rejected the possibility that non-Anglo-Saxon Protestants could ever emulate the American story." In other words, "for all their efforts, Americans could not replicate themselves in the Philippines, nor, at bottom, did they wish to do so" (p. 81). Instead, imperialists created hierarchies of difference to justify what Ann Laura Stoler has called "degrees of sovereignty," the "redefining [of] legal categories of belonging and quasi-membership, and shifting the geographic and demographic zones of *partially* suspended rights."[1] Quite appropriately, Harris concludes this second chapter with reference to the Insular Cases, which determined that the Constitution did not follow the flag into the Philippines.

Because much of the first two chapters is ground well-trod by historians like Kramer in *Blood of Government* and Gail Bederman in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (1996), among others, to my mind, the most interesting section of Harris's book is the second, "Creating Citizens," which moves from heated debates around annexation to colonial practice. In the first chapter of this section, Harris uses school textbooks to consider how Filipinos were educated to become citizens. She explains that teachers were expected to instruct Filipino students on sound "character," and models of good character were, without fail and but for the exception of José Rizal, white American men (p. 95). *The Filipino Teacher's Manual* (1907), for example, suggested that Filipino pupils "'can tell us why they like to read about Lincoln or Washington. They can tell us why everybody admires such men and calls them great men. The question may be asked, "Are we hard workers and honest like Lincoln?""' (p. 95). To be sure, Filipino students also received an education in the history of the archipelago–one that emphasized the Philippines as "hopelessly heterogeneous, a situation that will require centuries, rather than years, to remedy" (p. 99). Such history imparted an understanding of the nation that clearly carried political implications, and to Harris, it also projected U.S. authors' own frustrated desires for "a unified American culture" (p. 100).

Harris uses her study of textbooks and colonial pedagogy to show how U.S. imperialists subjected Filipinos to impossible criteria for citizenship–measures that imperialists themselves saw as ultimately "inseparable from both whiteness and Protestantism" (p. 94). This point is underscored in Harris's fourth chapter, "The National Christian," which examines two novels, one collection of short stories, and a memoir, all published between 1896 and 1912. Particularly interesting here is Harris's discussion of American school teacher Mary H. Fee's *A Woman's Impressions of the Philippines* (1912), which registered ambivalence and pessimism about the project of uplifting Filipinos. To Fee, religion presented an insoluble difference that made uplift impossible: Filipinos' Catholicism "obviate[d] the need to develop the Protestant passion for truth and with it, the intellectual rigor necessary for modern rationality" (p. 116). Harris concludes this chapter with a series of stories by Frank Steward called *Tales of Laguna* published in the *Colored American Magazine* in 1902 and 1903. In these stories, the worst fears of racist anti-annexationists came true. Romances between U.S. soldiers and native Filipinas produced biracial children and linguistic hybridity. Steward's Filipino characters spoke fusions of Tagalog, English, and Spanish, indicating that "the purity of the [white] race and its language was undermined by the contact between Americans and the inhabitants of [the] archipelago" (p. 119).

The third and last section of *God's Arbiters*, "The Eyes of the World," discusses how British commentators, Europeans, Latin Americans, and Filipinos viewed the prospect of U.S. annexation and colonialism in the Philippines. Harris argues that Americans in the United States absorbed Rudyard Kipling's call to arms, "The White Man's Burden," and other pro-imperialist counsel from Britain, and accented them with the U.S. narrative of special mission: "Taking up the white man's burden," Harris writes, became "a call to fulfill America's divine mandate, converting British calls for 'responsibility' into a national religious duty" (p. 148). "Saxon Eyes and Barbaric Souls," her sixth chapter, explores how the Philippine-American War and the United States more broadly were viewed by Europeans and by Latin American observers, like José Martí, Rubén Darío, and José Enrique Rodó. Like many in the United States, the latter three writers interpreted U.S. actions in the Western and Eastern hemispheres in distinctly religious terms, even "as a continuation of the religious struggle of the Reformation" (p. 163). But for Martí and Darío, who celebrated Catholicism, U.S. ad-

vances in the name of Protestantism and free trade were no special mission.

Harris's final chapter explores the writings of Filipino novelist José Rizal, General Emilio Aguinaldo, and nationalist Apolinario Mabini. Rizal, who died in 1896, did not predict that the United States might one day acquire the Philippines; to him, such a prospect seemed contrary to U.S. political ideals and traditions. Mabini, a student of the U.S. Constitution and its history, did see the U.S. flag rise on the Philippines, and he took pains to identify the contradictions between constitutional principles and U.S. imperial practice. To Harris, Mabini's surprise at this contradiction marked a "mistake"–that mistake "was to assume that Americans took their founding documents unadulterated; what he missed was the evangelical fervor with which, by 1899, those documents had been imbued" (p. 195). As on the U.S. mainland, imperialists' perception of religious and racial difference could nullify the Constitution for some who looked up to the U.S. flag.

By my lights, the contributions of this book are threefold. First, Harris's attention to religious rhetoric and her framing of the Philippine-American War in terms of religion are provocative and deserving of continued attention. Future work might pursue not just the deployment of religious rhetoric or the instrumental use of religion, but also the intersections of Protestant, Catholic, and indigenous religious institutions, practices, and politics in the colonial Philippines.

A second strength is in the sources and voices included in *God's Arbiters*. Harris's book, much like Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2003), is ultimately concerned with U.S. national identity and how that identity was defined in the context of empire. But Harris's choice of sources also allows us to see how peoples around the world–Filipinos, Europeans, and Latin Americans–heard U.S. words and interpreted its actions. Beyond giving agency to these peoples, Harris's account might well be read as a comparative history of imperial and anti-imperial formations. Harris's sources also demonstrate how debates around national identity and the meanings of citizenship, particularly in the long shadow of the Civil War, foiled neat distinctions between domestic affairs and foreign relations.

Finally, though the formidable title *God's Arbiters* might not imply it, Harris's account points not only to the contradictions but also to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of U.S. imperial power in the world. U.S. imperialists had to walk a tightrope: Filipinos had to be viewed as educable but not yet educated, capable of citizenship but not yet civilized, so as to justify the continued presence of U.S. tutors in self-government. Further, as *Tales of Laguna* surely intimated, white, Protestant architects of U.S. empire might not long dominate "American narratives" or define American identity, if they ever single-handedly did. On this score, Harris's discussion of "American narratives" would have been enriched, if not complicated, by including figures like anti-imperialist W. E. B. DuBois and the African American soldier David Fagen, who crossed lines during the Philippine-American War and fought alongside Filipino nationalists. These men were authors of American narratives, too.

Note

[1]. Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 128.

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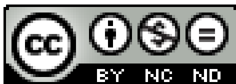

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