

# As Regards 'Patriotism'

by Mark Twain

*In the beginning of a change, the patriot is a scarce man, and brave, and hated and scorned. When his cause succeeds, the timid join him, for then it costs nothing to be a patriot.*

*Mark Twain's Notebook, 1905*

IT IS AGREED, in this country, that if a man can arrange his religion so that it perfectly satisfies his conscience, it is not incumbent upon him to care whether the arrangement is satisfactory to anyone else or not.

In Austria and some other countries this is not the case. There the state arranges a man's religion for him; he has no voice in it himself.

Patriotism is merely a religion -- love of country, worship of country, devotion to the country's flag and honor and welfare.

In absolute monarchies it is furnished from the throne, cut and dried, to the subject; in England and America it is furnished, cut and dried, to the citizen by the politician and the newspaper.

The newspaper-and-politician-manufactured patriot often gags in private over his dose; but he takes it, and keeps it on his stomach the best he can. Blessed are the meek.

Sometimes, in the beginning of an insane shabby political upheaval, he is strongly moved to revolt, but he doesn't do it -- he knows better. He knows that his maker would find out -- the maker of his patriotism, the windy and incoherent six-dollar subeditor of his village newspaper -- and would bray out in print and call him a traitor. And how dreadful that would be. It makes him tuck his tail between his legs and shiver. We all know -- the reader knows it quite well -- that \*two or three years ago nine-tenths of the human tails in England and America performed just that act. Which is to say, nine-tenths of the patriots in England and America turned traitor to keep from being called traitor. Isn't it true? You know it to be true. Isn't it curious?

Yet it was not a thing to be very seriously ashamed of. A man can seldom -- very, very seldom -- fight a winning fight against his training; the odds are too heavy. For many a year -- perhaps always -- the training of the two nations had been dead against independence in political thought, persistently inhospitable toward patriotism manufactured on a man's own premises, patriotism reasoned out in the man's own head and fire-assayed and tested and proved in his own conscience. The resulting patriotism was a shopworn product procured at second hand. The patriot did not know just how or when or where he got his opinions, neither did he care, so long as he was with what seemed the majority -- which was the main thing, the safe thing, the comfortable thing.

Does the reader believe he knows three men who have actual reasons for their pattern of patriotism -- and can furnish them? Let him not examine, unless he wants to be disappointed. He will be likely to find that his men got their patriotism at the public trough, and had no hand in its preparation themselves.

Training does wonderful things. It moved the people of this country to oppose the Mexican War; then moved them to fall in with what they supposed was the opinion of the majority -- majority patriotism is the customary patriotism -- and go down there and fight. Before the Civil War it made the North indifferent to slavery and friendly to the slave interest; in that interest it made Massachusetts hostile to the American flag, and she would not allow it to be hoisted on her State house -- in her eyes it was the flag of a faction. Then by and by, training swung Massachusetts the other way, and she went raging South to fight under that very flag and against that aforesaid protected interest of hers.

There is nothing that training cannot do. Nothing is above its reach or below it. It can turn bad morals to good, good morals to bad; it can destroy principles, it can recreate them; it can debase angels to men and lift men to angelship. And it can do any one of these miracles in a year -- even in six months.

Then men can be trained to manufacture their own patriotism. They can be trained to labor it out in their own heads and hearts and in the privacy and independence of their own premises. It can train them to stop taking it by command, as the Austrian takes his religion.



\*Ed. note: Twain was referring to the Boer War and the Philippine 'Insurrection' -- both colonial wars of imperial aggression against native peoples in South Africa and Asia fought around the turn of the previous century. Twain was a member of the "Anti-Imperialist League" formed to protest against the colonialization of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War.

Questions:

1. Why does Twain compare religion to patriotism?
2. According to Twain, Americans can be easily manipulated – why?
3. What does “patriotism” mean to Twain? To you?
4. Interpret the quote at the beginning of the article?
5. Can this article be applied to today’s society? Why or why not?