
Susan K. Harris. God's Arbiters: Americans and the Philippines, 1898-1902.

Paola Gemme



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10132>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10132

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Paola Gemme, "Susan K. Harris. God's Arbiters: Americans and the Philippines, 1898-1902.", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 12, Online since 27 September 2013, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10132> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.10132>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Susan K. Harris. *God's Arbiters: Americans and the Philippines, 1898-1902*.

Paola Gemme

REFERENCES

New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Pp. xii, 257. ISBN: 978-0-19-974010-9.

- 1 *God's Arbiters* examines the centrality of religious rhetoric in the debates over the annexation of the Philippines that took place during the Spanish-American War of 1898 and its aftermath. Specifically, Americans conceived of their nation as having a divine mandate to model and defend freedom in the rest of the world. Harris shows that expansionists and anti-expansionists alike shared the vision of the United States as divinely ordained to a global redemptive mission. They also shared the fundamental contradiction at the core of this national narrative, namely, that the belief in exemplary American freedom coexisted with the conviction that only Anglo-Saxon Protestants could enact such freedom. Thus, one could argue either that the United States had the duty to annex the Philippines and govern them because their dark-skinned Catholic population needed tutelage in Christianity and republicanism, or that the United States should not annex the archipelago because the national mission required racial and religious homogeneity and would be compromised by the influx of a non-white, non Protestant-people. The argument changes, but its premises—the exemplary role of the United States, the fusion of republicanism with Protestant Christianity, and essentialist, hierarchical notions of racial difference—remain constant.
- 2 Unearthing the religious component of American national identity and highlighting the inherent contradiction of such identity is no doubt important, but, for European Americanists, not the only reason why Harris's book is noteworthy. While the last two

decades have witnessed repeated calls for a transnational approach to U.S. culture, studies of American interaction with the world beyond the nation's geopolitical boundaries have often privileged the U.S. side of the encounter over the international side. This is not the case in *God's Arbiters*. The third section of the book, "The Eyes of the World," is devoted to the analysis of reactions to the U.S. annexation of the Philippines by commentators situated outside the U.S., whether in Europe, Latin America, or the Philippines. Here Harris is really treading new ground. Secondary sources become scarce, as do primary sources translated into English, so that Harris provides her own translation from the Spanish periodical *Diario de Barcelona* and, among others, Nicaraguan Rubén Darío's "The Marvelous Red Gorillas," a fierce indictment of American acquisitiveness. Collectively, Harris demonstrates, Latin American intellectuals produced a counternarrative to the vision of the United States as redeemer nation in which their northern neighbor was staged as a Shakespearean Caliban, the emblem of materialism, and Catholic Latin America as Ariel, the symbol of spirituality. Filipino nationalists similarly responded to the American construction of the Philippines as steeped in barbarism and idolatry with sophisticated if ultimately powerless legal arguments about the unconstitutionality of extending American power over the Philippines while denying them basic constitutional rights like freedom of speech. Thus, *God's Arbiters* truly fulfills the vision of a comparative American Studies practice in that all sides of the dialogue over the U.S. conquest of the Philippines are given the same careful attention.

- 3 The variety and sheer quantity of texts examined is also commendable. Harris moves deftly from Mark Twain's anti-imperialist essays to congressional debates, popular evangelical fiction, advertisements, and children's textbooks. Her prose is refreshingly clear throughout. While *God's Arbiters* requires an educated reader, it does not assume one as conversant with several humanistic disciplines as its writer. Economic or sociological theories are explained, terms are defined, historical background is consistently provided. Finally, the reader is invited to notice the persistence of the notion of national, God-given mission to export freedom in post 9/11 presidential speeches intended muster support for oversea military ventures—again, on both sides of the political spectrum.
- 4 Susan Harris's *God's Arbiters* is well worth reading. It furthers previous analyses of imperialist rhetoric by weaving religion with race. It focuses on the voices of the conquered as well as those of the conquerors. It is truly interdisciplinary. And finally, it is both accessible and pertinent to the contemporary reader. It embodies the American Studies tradition of anti-elitism and its new global direction at their best.

AUTHOR

PAOLA GEMME

Arkansas Tech University