



# What Is Man?: And Other Irreverent Essays

*Mark Twain*

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## **What Is Man?: And Other Irreverent Essays** Mark Twain

Mark Twain is sometimes envisioned as a kind of 19th-century American offshoot of Voltaire. Like his French counterpart, he expressed a deeply felt indignation at religious hypocrisy and obscurantism, and peppered his satirical writings, especially in his later years, with stinging wit and iconoclastic fervor.

This unique collection assembles writings in which Twain views the multifarious claims of religion--metaphysical, moral, and political--with a skeptical eye.

As editor S. T. Joshi points out in the introduction, Twain took aim at religion not just out of irreverent glee but because of serious concerns about central religious tenets that weighed on his mind for much of his life. Though he maintained till his death that he believed in God, he expressed deep skepticism regarding such religious beliefs as special Providence (God's interference in the affairs of individual human beings), the concept of hell, the religious basis of morality, and the divine inspiration of the Bible.

The centerpiece of the book is the long philosophical dialogue, *What Is Man?* (1906), which presents a rigidly deterministic view of human behavior, claiming that every action is the product of outside influences. Twain also asserts that altruism does not exist: we help others primarily as a means of making ourselves comfortable. Other writings in the book condemn religious exclusivity, the hypocritical Christian thirst for money, and the disgraceful treatment of animals by a supposedly moral human race.

Containing many writings by Twain not generally available except in expensive academic publications, this excellent and affordable paperback edition has been annotated to elucidate historical, literary, religious, and other references. Also included is a lengthy introduction providing a historical overview of Twain's shifting attitudes toward religion.

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