

## HERALDING THE CALL OF POPULISM: KANSAS METHODISTS AND THE 1896 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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The 1896 presidential election between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan was one of the most pivotal and dramatic elections in American history. It not only represented a realignment in party policies and strongholds, but it also effectively ended the reform-minded Populist Party. The Republican McKinley defeated Bryan, who headed the Democratic and Populist tickets, largely by winning the coastal and former Northwest Territory.

In his election campaign, Bryan faced enormous challenges. First, the relatively unknown Nebraska orator became a serious contender on the Democratic ticket only a few months before the convention. Second, Bryan faced a severe lack of funds in comparison to the enormous war chest collected for McKinley by his influential ally, Mark Hanna. McKinley enjoyed superiority in the press and sat atop a political machine that, according to historian Paul Glad, made Bryan's campaign look like a "peanut operation."<sup>1</sup> Third, the currency question split the Democratic Party between "Gold Democrats" and "Silverites." Bryan was a member of the latter group that supported the coinage of silver as currency and wanted to set its value as equal to one-sixteenth of gold. Proponents believed the policy change would raise the amount of money in circulation, increase the lending powers of Midwestern banks, and help struggling laborers and farmers. Symptomatic of the polemic nature of the currency issue, the potential by-product of inflation concerned many Democrats who left the party to form the National Democratic Party after Bryan's nomination.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, McKinley proclaimed that gold was the only "sound money," and he was helped by his reputation as an expert on economic and tariff issues that gave him credibility in the eyes of potential voters.

In addition to these national challenges, Bryan also faced serious problems at the state level. In Kansas, for example, the Populist Party split over whether to continue being a third party in the national election or to com-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul W. Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1964), 170.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the currency issue and the 1896 election nationwide, see Stanley Llewellyn Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1964); and R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2010).

promise and fuse with Democrats. Populist Henry Demarest Lloyd summed up the predicament: “If we fuse, we are sunk; if we don’t fuse, all the silver men we have will leave us for the more powerful Democrats.”<sup>3</sup> This projection proved accurate as the alliance between the Populist Party and Bryan caused several of its members to leave for the Republican ticket. Furthermore, a Democratic nominee for President had never previously won Kansas. Kansas’s support of the Republican Party dated back to the Civil War and increased because of the large immigration of northerners. One Kansan alleged that “hell is peopled by two kinds of folks, those who don’t read the Bible and those who vote Democratic.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, the largest denomination in Kansas was McKinley’s own Methodist Church.<sup>5</sup> This problem was further compounded because Methodists had a long-standing history of voting for Republicans who had instituted statewide prohibition in 1880. To win Kansas, Bryan would have to garner substantial support from Methodists and convince them to cross denominational lines and vote for a Presbyterian.

How then did Bryan win Kansas? Why did the majority of Methodists break, not only with the Republican Party, but also with their fellow Methodist McKinley? If the Methodist Church had explicitly endorsed Bryan, the answer would be less complicated. Because the Church believed that politics should be separate from the pulpit, however, they declined to support either candidate. Methodist newspapers took a similar stance, as they frequently reported on both candidates, but never endorsed either politician. Instead, the combination of four important factors resulted in support for Bryan among Methodists. First, the deteriorating economic conditions in Kansas from the mid-1880s until the election created a dissatisfied populace that faulted the Republican Party. Second, the Populist Party attracted Methodists and other denominations that had intimate knowledge of scripture and were exposed to powerful speakers, which prepared the way for the master orator Bryan. Third, the destitute Methodist farmers and laborers turned to the vibrant Populist Party that valued humanitarian concern for all denominations. The Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist newspapers, Populists, and Bryan all spoke in the same religious language, articulated the same humanitarian concern and social gospel, and professed a godly message that resonated with the Methodist people. Finally, Methodists, who valued prohibition highly, became dissatisfied with Republican lack of enforcement of Kansas

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Glad, *McKinley, Bryan and the People*, 155.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Russell B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics: A Historical Study of Its Origins and Development, 1870-1958* (Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1959), 48; from 1891 to 1896, only twelve of 350 seats in the Kansas legislature were held by Democrats.

<sup>5</sup> The largest denominations in Kansas ordered by number of members: Methodists, 95,781; Roman Catholics, 67,562; Baptists, 34,511; Presbyterians, 31,393; Disciples of Christ, 25,200; Lutherans, 16,262; United Brethren, 14,356; Congregationalists, 11,915; Friends, 8,257; and Mennonites, 4,620 (U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890* [Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894]).

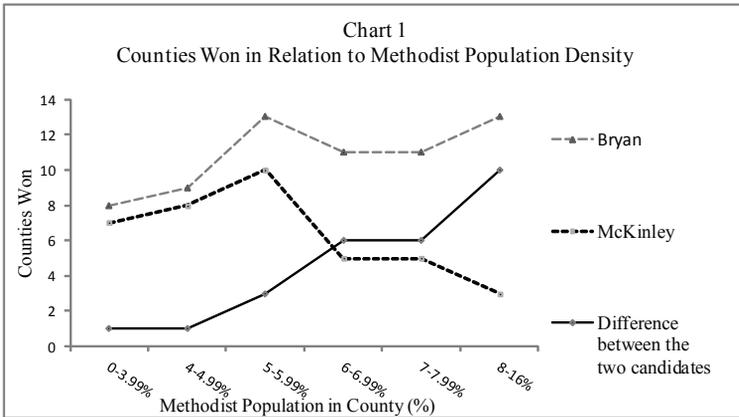
temperance laws and began to look to the Populist Party for a solution.

Although it is impossible to know for certain why the population voted for a particular candidate, an analysis of the 1896 election reveals that Bryan received significant support among Methodist voters. Religious affiliation alone was surely not the only motive in voting, but the election results suggest that it was an important factor. Statewide, the Methodist population per county averaged 6.53%.<sup>6</sup> Out of the forty-four counties with an above average population of Methodists, it is notable that Bryan won the majority of votes in thirty-two. The twelve counties with an above average Methodist population that McKinley won were traditional Republican strongholds and had voted for Republican candidates in the 1892 and 1900 presidential, the 1896 gubernatorial, and the 1896 At-Large Representative elections.<sup>7</sup> This result would be negligible if the Bryan-Methodist correlation were a phenomenon that occurred only in sparsely populated counties. However, in the twenty most populous counties that contained 42% of the state population, the Populist Bryan won fourteen. Of these fourteen, ten had an above average population of Methodists. As the proportion of Methodists in the general population lowered, Bryan's advantage was less pronounced. In short, as demonstrated by the solid line in Chart 1, the higher the percentage of Methodists in the population, the more likely the county was won by Bryan. Although this correlation does not prove that Bryan enjoyed full Methodist support, it does suggest a link between the Methodist population and Bryan's success in Kansas.

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<sup>6</sup> This figure is somewhat misleading because many children of Methodist families were not counted as communicants, but they still counted in the state population. Therefore, Methodists are underrepresented in the 7%. Nevertheless, because the figure is applied across all counties, it provides a reliable pivot point for determining locations with the highest density of Methodists in a county. The 1890 census defined communicants as "meant to embrace all, without distinction of sex, who are privileged to participate in the ordinance of communion in denominations which observe it, and all members in other denominations, such as Unitarians, Friends, and Jews." Figures are based on U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890*, xii; U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United State at the Eleventh Census, 1890*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894, 20; and June Cabe, *Kansas Votes: National Elections, 1859-1956* (Lawrence: Governmental Research Center, U of Kansas, 1957).

<sup>7</sup> The counties with an above average Methodist population that voted for McKinley were Woodson, Riley, *Reno*, Pottawatomie, Morris, Logan, Jackson, Kiowa, Harvey, *Douglas*, Allen, and *Shawnee*. The counties with an above average Methodist population that voted for Bryan were Anderson, *Bourbon*, *Butler*, Chase, Clay, Coffee, *Cowley*, *Crawford*, *Dickinson*, Elk, Franklin, Graham, Greenwood, Johnson, Kingman, *Labette*, Linn, *Lyon*, *Montgomery*, Neosho, Ottawa, Pawnee, Phillips, Pratt, Rooks, Scott, *Sedgwick*, Stanton, *Sumner*, Thomas, Trego, and Wilson. The counties that were among the twenty most populous are in italics. Of the remaining seven most populous counties with below average Methodist population, Bryan won four (*Wyandotte*, Leavenworth, Cherokee, and Osage), while McKinley won three (*Atchison*, Marshall, and Washington).



Source: See Footnote 6

Furthermore, when the election results are applied geographically one sees that Bryan performed extremely well in both the northwest and south-east portions of Kansas. Because population was densest in the eastern half of Kansas, it is important to note that southeast quarter of Kansas also contained the densest population of Methodists. When the Methodist population percentage is applied to the election results, the advantage in southeast Kansas is significant. In addition, the two Methodist newspapers in Kansas were located in the southeastern portion of the state, in the towns of Wichita (Sedgwick County) and Winfield (Cowley County).<sup>8</sup> This correlation between Populism and Methodism further indicates that Bryan enjoyed support from McKinley's own denomination.

To account for this result, one must examine the political climate in Kansas before the election. From the 1870s until the mid-1880s, Kansas experienced both an economic and a population boom. The railroads invested heavily in westward expansion and a huge migration followed. Kansas farmers benefited from a period of increased rainfall, which resulted in large profits that were invested into more property. In addition, land speculators moved into Kansas and inflated the price of property even further. Between 1880 and 1885, the population of Kansas increased from 900,000 to 1.2 million while property values doubled.<sup>9</sup> Following the boom,

<sup>8</sup> At the time of the election, only two Methodists newspapers were in production in Kansas—the *Western Methodist* (Wichita, KS) and *Christian Herald* (Winfield, KS). With little support from the Methodist Church and fewer subscribers with disposable income, several Methodist newspapers in Kansas were forced to close, including the *Epworth Advocate* (Frankfort), *Manhattan District Methodist* (Manhattan), *Methodist Lever* (South Haven), *Kansas Church Tidings*, *The Kansas Methodist*, *First Methodist*, *Kansas Methodist Times* and *The Kansas Christian Advocate*. The latter five were located in Topeka and faced stiff competition from a myriad of newspapers, specifically the *State Journal* and *Topeka Daily Capital*.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Curtis Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11: 4 (March 1925), 470.

however, the high land values and the onset of poor weather contributed to an eventual economic collapse, because farmers found they could not grow and ship enough crops to meet the rising railroad prices. Many Kansas farmers still owed substantial debt on their newly acquired property, which plummeted in value. In addition, prices for crops fell nationwide at alarming rates. One Methodist newspaper warned its readers: "Do not starve your preacher because 'times are hard.' They will be much harder if the preachers cannot live in this country and hold up the standards of truth."<sup>10</sup> Out of these conditions, the Populist movement emerged and sought political reform to aid the besieged Kansans who confronted increasingly deteriorating financial conditions.

Despite the Populist movement's popularity among historians, a consensus in terms of its causes and key players has been unattainable. Historian John D. Hicks viewed the Populist movement as a political development that sought governmental reform to aid struggling farmers.<sup>11</sup> Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* rejected Hicks's assessment and concluded that the Populists were backward-looking reactionaries who were paranoid, nativist, and anti-intellectual.<sup>12</sup> In 1963, Walter T. K. Nugent challenged Hofstadter's findings and suggested that Kansas Populism was primarily due to economic concerns and actually displayed tolerance towards outsiders.<sup>13</sup> Gene Clanton's study of Kansas Populism among its influential leaders found that the movement was a rational and progressive call for governmental intervention.<sup>14</sup> Recently, Charles Postel's *The Populist Vision*, winner of the 2008 Bancroft and Frederick Jackson Turner Prizes, argued that the Populists were both forward thinking and modern in their reform through technology, organizational tactics, and ideology.<sup>15</sup> However, despite these various conclusions, these historians have given insufficient attention to an essential element of Populism—religion. Historian Peter Argersinger asserted that the Populist movement was "not only a movement of religious people, but a religious movement of people."<sup>16</sup> Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander concluded that "while scholars allude to the similarity between the People's Party's organizing style and that of revivalist camp meetings, or to the use of religious imagery in Populist stump speeches, few treat religion with ex-

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<sup>10</sup> *Christian Herald* (September, 1896).

<sup>11</sup> John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1931).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1956).

<sup>13</sup> Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas, Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: U Kansas P, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> The sheer scope of Postel's work prevented him from investigating the influence of religion on Populism extensively. His work examined several topics from "education, technology, women's rights, and business, to government, race, religion, and science," but suggested that each topic needed to be investigated further for a "many-sided reevaluation of what Populism meant" (Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007], viii).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Argersinger, "Pentecostal Politics in Kansas: Religion, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Gospel of Populism," *Kansas Quarterly* 1:4 (Fall, 1969), 24.

tended analytic seriousness.”<sup>17</sup> Although many authors have written large treatments on Populism, none have devoted sufficient attention to the influence of religion on the movement. The present article takes a highly focused approach to demonstrate that, in the 1896 Presidential election, religion, particularly Methodism, played an enormous role in not only influencing voting behavior, but also providing the Populists with an organizational structure and rhetorical medium to disseminate their message. Without understanding the religious, pietist impulse in the Populist movement, one cannot understand why so many evangelicals were attracted to the party.

In his study of North Carolina Populism, historian Joe Creech found that evangelicalism “fundamentally shaped the way Populists perceived the world and formulated solutions to its problems. Evangelicalism provided leadership and organizational models for the movement, and evangelical beliefs infused the movement with meaning and motive force.”<sup>18</sup> Creech’s findings about evangelicalism, which includes Methodism, are equally applicable to Kansas, where religion provided an important base for the reform movement. William Peffer, an exemplar of Kansas Populism in the United States Senate, noted in 1891 that “these [Populist] meetings to a large extent, and in many instances wholly, take the place of churches in the religious enjoyment of the people.”<sup>19</sup> Creech echoed Peffer’s statement and summarized the importance of religion in Populism:

Evangelical ideas about politics, democracy, economics, and relationships of class, race, and gender not only shaped Populists’ blueprint for reform but, more important, motivated Populists to set duty to God above allegiances to party . . . in order to restore what they understood to be America’s God-Given system of economic liberalism and political freedom. As their religious ideals shaped the way Populists understood themselves and their movement, they wove their political and economic reforms into a grand cosmic narrative pitting the forces of God and democracy against those of Satan and tyranny.<sup>20</sup>

This belief that the Populist cause was divinely sanctioned infused the movement with tremendous energy and enthusiasm that, in turn, influenced many Kansans. Methodist leaders certainly were aware of the political change in Kansas, especially with respect to the growing dissatisfaction with the Republican Party. In 1892, the Reverend Richard Wake wondered “whether this alliance [between Methodists and the Republican Party] will continue

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<sup>17</sup> Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33:1 (March, 1994), 1. For a brief overview of the Populist historiography, see “The Populist Vision: A Roundtable Discussion,” edited by Worth Robert Miller, ed. *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 32 (Spring 2009), 18-45; and “Agricultural History Roundtable on Populism: Robert C. McMath, Jr., Peter H. Argersinger, Connie L. Lester, Michael F. Magliari, and Walter Nugent,” *Agricultural History* 82 (Winter, 2008), 1-35.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2006), xx.

<sup>19</sup> William A. Peffer, *The Farmers’ Side: His Troubles and Their Remedy* (New York: Appleton, 1891), 149.

<sup>20</sup> Creech, *Righteous Indignation*, xviii.

is becoming each year more and more uncertain.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the deteriorating economic conditions, many Kansans looked for aid from the federal government. Many perceived the Republican Party as corrupt and greedy. Populists accused Mark Hanna, McKinley’s campaign manager, of buying votes with large sums of money collected from the wealthy eastern industrialists. The Reverend W. G. Todd proclaimed that “the Republican Party started out right, but greed and selfishness took possession of it and we have laid it aside.”<sup>22</sup> On the eve of the election, a Kansas Methodist newspaper commented that the distrust of political leaders led to “a revolution in political thought” because leaders “promised relief and when entrusted with power, relief has not come.”<sup>23</sup> The growing frustration with the Republican Party combined with a religiously infused Populist movement attracted many Methodists to the Populist Party.

Numerous Populist leaders interjected their speeches with religious imagery, but perhaps the most well known was a fiery Kansas woman named Mary Elizabeth Lease. Known as “Mary Yellin” by her detractors, she exemplified the fusion of politics and religion into extreme partisanship that left little doubt as to who was on the side of God, as she demonstrated in 1894:

The People’s Party is in accord with the right and justice. It is in accord with the teachings of Christ and the Constitution of the United States. If you vote for any other party you vote for a hell upon earth . . . . Our social conditions have no part with the teaching of Christ. If you are afraid to attack the plutocrats, then you need a new Christ—one who will hobnob with the rich and who will preach Heaven for the rich and Hell for the tramps.<sup>24</sup>

Lease illustrates a recurring theme in Populist rhetoric. Populists often referred to themselves with religious language as the oppressed while referring to their political counterparts as the oppressors. In Populist newspapers, for instance, Republicans were continually demonized as the party of money and corruption. The Populist newspaper *Advocate* published an article by C. G. Allen of Meade, Kansas, in which he identified McKinley and his followers as corrupt and greedy. He then proceeded to make a plea for the oppressed:

Now, my dear brethren, we have the rich on one side and the common people on the other. Upon which side are your sympathies? ‘The common people heard Christ gladly . . . .’ The rich were the crucifiers and murderers of the Lord of Glory. I do not know of a single passage of Scripture that commends the rich as such. Paul says: ‘The love of money is the root of all evil;’ James says: ‘Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do they not blaspheme that worthy name by which ye are called?’ I hope none of you who read this are worshipping the golden calf, but if you are, I exhort you to cease such worship and come over on the Lord’s side.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wake, “The Methodist Episcopal Church in Politics,” *Agora* (July, 1892).

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Elizabeth Barr, “The Populist Uprising,” in William Connelley, ed., *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1918), 1170.

<sup>23</sup> *Christian Herald* (September and October, 1896).

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Williams and Alexander, “Righteous Rhetoric,” 8.

<sup>25</sup> C. G. Allen, *Advocate* (Topeka, KS; October 18, 1896).

These charges against Republicans proved even more potent with the deteriorating economic conditions, and Bryan was quick to draw upon this sentiment to create his own religious discourse.

Although less divisive than Lease and Allen, Bryan masterfully used religious language to emphasize the virtue of his crusade, which resonated with Methodists. Bryan did not regard his election as merely a political contest, but as a struggle between good and evil. For example, in a speech in front of Jewish Democrats in Nebraska, he recalled a story from the Old Testament: "David conquered not because he was stronger, but because he was on the right side; and if in this contest I am likened to David, let me reply that as David triumphed because he was right, so my only hope of victory is in the righteousness of my cause."<sup>26</sup> Historians have long noted Bryan's gifted oratory, especially in the famous "Cross of Gold" speech.<sup>27</sup> Historian Richard Hofstadter aptly described him as the "Democrat as revivalist."<sup>28</sup> A staunch detractor of Bryan and lifelong Republican, Emporia newspaperman William Allen White later responded to the "Cross of Gold" speech: "It was the first time in my life and in the life of a generation in which any man large enough to lead a national party had boldly and unashamedly made his cause that of the poor and the oppressed."<sup>29</sup> Populists such as Lease prepared evangelical Kansas Methodists for Bryan's religiously infused political message and created powerful dichotomies in order to build support for their cause. During his incredible traveling schedule during the campaign, Bryan apologized for his hoarse speech because "a large portion of my voice has been left along the line of travel, where it is still calling sinners to repentance."<sup>30</sup>

Dissatisfied with the Republican Party, Populists also increased cooperation among Protestant denominations in Kansas. In previous decades, denominations, especially the Methodists and Baptists, viewed the western frontier as battleground for winning souls to their Christian beliefs and practices. However, the Populist movement reduced the importance of denominationalism in Kansas. Religiously imbued political language not only helped to alleviate hostility between people, but it also provided common ground "for what otherwise might have remained factions separated by cultural differences."<sup>31</sup> A brief examination of the religious denominations of the Populist leaders in Kansas reveals that various Protestant groups were

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People*, 177.

<sup>27</sup> See Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971); Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Norman: U Oklahoma P, 1994); and Michael Kazin, *Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 186.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People*, 136-137.

<sup>30</sup> Kevin Phillips, *William McKinley* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 78.

<sup>31</sup> Williams and Alexander, "Righteous Rhetoric," 3.

represented.<sup>32</sup> Although Methodism was the largest affiliation among leaders in Populism—followed by Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists—all contributed significant leaders to the movement.<sup>33</sup> Bryan embodied the cross-denominational and religious changes that occurred in Kansas. Son of a Baptist father and Methodist mother, Bryan's childhood home was constantly filled with ministers from many religious affiliations.<sup>34</sup> Although a devout Presbyterian and an elder in his church, he was capable of speaking across denominational lines. Just as Bryan was an exemplary Christian, William McKinley devoutly attended the Methodist Church and did not partake in dancing, card playing, or liquor. However, the Populist effect of de-emphasized denominational lines facilitated the selection of Bryan by Methodist voters despite his church affiliation. In the end, McKinley and Bryan's personal religious beliefs had little effect on Kansas voters. Both were perceived, and rightly so, by Methodists in the state as devout and pious individuals with an intimate knowledge of the Bible. What attracted groups like the Methodists in Kansas to Bryan and the Populists was the ability of the party leaders to formulate a message with religious enthusiasm, and address issues Methodists were concerned with, such as humanitarianism. Populists united behind their Christian orientation that centered upon social concerns and interest in human welfare.<sup>35</sup>

Humanitarian aid had always been an essential element in Methodism. Westward expansion only increased the need for missionary efforts. Despite the extreme fiscal crisis in Kansas, Methodists still supported missionary efforts around the world. In Kansas, Methodists promoted prison reform and supported increased pensions for Civil War veterans. They also advocated for the establishment of a government savings bank to help struggling farmers secure loans.<sup>36</sup> Methodists, along with many other denominations during the late nineteenth century, were reform-minded postmillennialists

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<sup>32</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the religious affiliations of the Populist leaders, see Lengel, "The Righteous Cause: Some Religious Aspects of Kansas Populism," PhD diss., U. Oregon, 1968, chap. 2. Lengel provides the most in depth analysis of the religious influences on Kansas Populism, but focuses primarily on the humanitarian reform championed by many of its leaders.

<sup>33</sup> To a lesser extent, other denominations like the Quakers, Universalists, United Brethren, and a few Roman Catholics joined the Populist leadership. In North Carolina, historian Joe Creech found that the Methodists, Baptists, and Free Will Baptists were the evangelical forces behind the movement (Creech, *Righteous Indignation*, xviii). In Texas, Robert McMath found similar results and concluded that an important element of the form of agrarian protest was evangelical Protestantism (Robert C. McMath, "Populist Base Communities: The Evangelical Roots of Farm Protest in Texas," *Locus* 1 [1988], 53-63).

<sup>34</sup> Methodists were probably unaware that Bryan was raised in such a diverse religious environment. Newspapers consistently reported that Bryan was a devout Presbyterian and usually included that he was an elder in his church.

<sup>35</sup> Leland Levi Lengel, "Radical Crusaders and a Conservative Church: Attitudes of Populists Toward Contemporary Protestantism in Kansas," *American Studies* 13:2 (Fall, 1972), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Methodists undertook notable missionary efforts in Africa, South America, China, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, India, Bulgaria, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Korea, and Hawaii. These missions not only brought Christ to people, but also set up hospitals, built schools, and provided food and shelter (*Western Methodist*, September 10, 1896; October 22, 1896; September 24, 1896).

who adhered to the social gospel. These Christians believed that improved worldly conditions would reform and better people's lives and enhance their spirituality. Sydney Ahlstrom, an American religious historian, included the Populists among the social gospellers.<sup>37</sup> In short, the Populists' beliefs in worldly reform and humanitarian concern paralleled Methodists' own beliefs and practices.

Even though the Methodist Church did not officially endorse either Bryan or McKinley, Methodist sermons and newspapers were similar to Populist rhetoric in both tone and substance. In his analysis of Kansas Populism, historian Leland Lengel argued that the Populist movement primarily was a humanitarian effort to aid financially weakened farmers. Lengel stated the two tendencies of Kansas Populism: "On the one hand, they demonstrated a widespread humanitarian concern, whether by means of political action, political evangelization, or utopian colonies. On the other hand, this humanitarianism among the leaders of the party stemmed from religious, theistic, and philosophical backgrounds as varied as the men who held them."<sup>38</sup> One of the principal reasons that the Methodist Church survived the poor economic conditions of the time was its ability to respond to its congregations through humanitarian efforts. For instance, the *Western Methodist*, published in Kansas, printed a sermon that concluded that God's people in the Old Testament gave about one-third of their total income to "charitable and religious purposes." The paper added that selfless giving was "the road to wealth, but history records the fact, that they [Old Testament people] were never so prosperous financially, never so strong nationally, and never so virtuous and happy as when giving with scrupulous honesty."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in a sermon suggesting that the Methodist Church should refrain from political preaching, the Reverend Joseph Long of Kansas nevertheless conveyed the importance of the humanitarian spirit in language similar to Populist rhetoric. He believed that "wise reform" should be done by active Christians and not by the church. In a comparison with the early Christians, he stated, "Then, as now, capital exploited labor, the money power corrupted legislation, and the masses of the people were ground down beneath the heel of oppression."<sup>40</sup> These sermons are strikingly similar to many of Bryan's speeches. For instance, Bryan stated that "this is an age of rapid accumulation of wealth, and the multiplication of corporations gives to money an extraordinary power."<sup>41</sup> Bryan was able to appeal to the Methodists because his ideology was similar to the evolving viewpoints that Methodists held at the time.

Despite the Church's politically neutral stance, Methodists as individuals

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<sup>37</sup> Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1972), 788.

<sup>38</sup> Lengel, "The Righteous," 45.

<sup>39</sup> *Western Methodist* (August 13, 1896).

<sup>40</sup> "The Proper Attitude of the Church to Reforms," *Western Methodist* (September 24, 1896).

<sup>41</sup> William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey, 1896), 55.

did not abstain from the political arena. The *Western Methodist* reprinted an article from the *Zion's Herald* stating that "there may not be any politics in Methodism, but . . . there is a good deal of Methodism in politics."<sup>42</sup> Methodists represented the largest denomination in the Kansas Legislature at a higher percentage than the Kansas population. Not all Methodists were Populists, as is evidenced in McKinley, but the Methodist politicians in the Kansas Statehouse were more often Populists than they were Republicans. For instance, of the members whose church affiliation can be identified in the 1895-1896 Kansas Senate, 45% were Methodists with 70% of those Methodists in the Populist Party.<sup>43</sup>

The Methodist Church was the only denomination with the organizational and financial strength to expand into the rural areas of Kansas where farmers struggled to survive the economic depression. Historian Peter Argersinger, in an attempt to answer why the Populists were strong in the state, pointed to the failure of the mainstream churches to provide for their congregations both economically and spiritually. He explains that out of desperation and dissatisfaction, many church-goers turned to the religiously inclined Populist Party.<sup>44</sup> Although this was certainly true of many of the Protestant denominations, Argersinger failed to cite any evidence that the financial situation affected the Methodist Church in the same way. Methodists certainly felt the immense economic pressures of the various "panics," but they still increased in membership, built churches, and organized more conferences to meet the needs of the Kansas population.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, intense and charismatic oratory enlarged the church membership, which flourished during the early nineteenth century based on extemporaneous and impassioned preachers like Charles Finney and Peter Cartwright. Populist meetings were exhilarating and galvanizing events with energetic leaders who spoke the language of religious revivals. Writing years later, Elizabeth N. Barr described the powerful movement in Kansas:

The upheaval that took place . . . [c]an hardly be diagnosed as a political campaign. It was a religious revival, a crusade, a pentecost of politics in which a tongue of flame sat upon every man, and each spake as the spirit gave him utterance. For Mary E. Lease . . . and half a hundred others who lectured up and down the land, were not the only people who could talk on the issues of the day. The farmers, the country merchants, the cattle-herders, they of the long chin-whiskers, and they of the broad-brimmed hats and heavy boots, had also heard the word and could preach the gospel of Populism. The dragon's teeth were sprouting in every nook and corner

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<sup>42</sup> *Western Methodist* (August 13, 1896).

<sup>43</sup> Of the 23 Populist members of the 1895 to 1896 Kansas Senate, the denominations of twelve could not be identified. Seven were Methodists, two were Presbyterians, one Roman Catholic, and one Quaker. Republicans had only three Methodists (Lengel, "The Righteous," 348-353).

<sup>44</sup> Peter Argersinger, "Pentecostal Politics," 24-39.

<sup>45</sup> From 1890 to 1894, Methodists increased the number of ministers from 420 to 512; members from 68,638 to 78,640; and churches from 653 to 813 (Don Holter, *Fire on the Prairie: Methodism in the History of Kansas* [Kansas City, MO: Editorial Board of the Kansas Methodist History, 1969], 298).

of the State.<sup>46</sup>

Populists recreated the intense camp-meeting revivals so vital to Methodism's success in the West. Following the Populist convention in 1896, the *Western Methodist* proudly reported that there was a "noteworthy Methodist flavor at the St. Louis Convention."<sup>47</sup> Bryan personified many of the elements Methodists found so appealing about the Populist Party.

If at the conference level the Methodist Church declined to support any political ticket, it did not stop the local Methodist clergy from supporting Populism. The *Ottawa Journal and Triumph* reported that a Methodist minister who told his congregation that "those who heeded Republican claims and voted for [Republican John] Ingalls . . . denied the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>48</sup> The Reverend D. E. Hoover, a Methodist minister from the Garden City area, angered the Republicans among his parishioners by boldly speaking "for free silver."<sup>49</sup>

An exemplary illustration of the compatibility of Methodism and Populism was the Reverend Jeremiah Botkin. Botkin, a Methodist preacher, left his Wellington pastorate to join the Populist movement to "heal those broken hearts" crushed by the weight of the "Money Power."<sup>50</sup> He faced severe criticism, especially from the Republican press, for his decision. In 1894, Botkin defended his actions in the Populist newspaper, the *Advocate*: "There is but one thing for me to do and that is take the stump and preach to the multitudes the gospel of reform; of humanity, of God."<sup>51</sup> Botkin saw Populism as an extension of religion and left his pastorate because he believed politics would lead to true reform. The *Topeka Daily Capital*, a Republican-friendly newspaper, referred to Botkin as radical and quoted him as saying that he was a "Christian socialist."<sup>52</sup> Whatever the case, Botkin's background as a Methodist preacher with notable oratory skills led to a successful career in politics. Even as he announced his resignation from his pastorate, Botkin displayed his familiarity with the traditional Populist rhetoric:

By a series of the most damnable legislative enactments on record, beginning more than thirty years ago, our national congress has stealthily proceeded to enthrone gold, contract the currency and place the entire monetary system of the country in the hands of a few men in whom greed is the only motive and personal interest the only care . . . I have taken this new departure because I am convinced that the People's party affords me the best opportunity for working hopefully for the triumph of true reform.<sup>53</sup>

Botkin utilized evangelical rhetoric to speak of political issues and focused

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth N. Barr, "The Populist Uprising," *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, William E. Connelly, ed., (Chicago: Lewis, 1918), 1148-1149.

<sup>47</sup> *Western Methodist* (August 13, 1896).

<sup>48</sup> *Ottawa Journal and Triumph* (Topeka, KS; October 11, 1894).

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Lengel, "The Righteous," 245.

<sup>50</sup> *Industrial Advocate* (El Dorado, KS; February 11, 1892).

<sup>51</sup> *Advocate*, August 22, 1894.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremiah Botkin, *Topeka Daily Capital* (Topeka, KS; September 2, 1894).

<sup>53</sup> *Advocate* (August 22, 1894).

on Populism as the answer to the nation's woes.

This synthesis of Populist ideas and Methodists beliefs can also be seen in the issue of prohibition. In 1880, Kansas Methodists celebrated the passage of a state law that outlawed the sale of intoxicating beverages. As evidenced in the abundance of articles and advertisements demonizing liquor, Methodist newspapers stayed politically neutral in almost everything except prohibition. The Kansas Methodist Northwest Conference stated the general sentiment of all the Kansas Conferences in April 1896: "We believe that no candidate ought to expect, nor ought he to receive the votes of Methodist laymen unless he will place himself on record as being unalterably opposed to the liquor traffic."<sup>54</sup> The Methodist General Conference of 1892 proclaimed itself "strenuously non partisan" and acknowledged allegiance to no political creed. However, "when moral issues are before the public," the Church affirmed that "our people are invariably found on the side of the highest standard."<sup>55</sup> In fact, the quintessential issue in Methodist newspapers was prohibition, with little respect for either political party if they demonstrated tolerance for liquor. The *Western Methodist* advised its subscribers to refrain from casting a ballot in the 1896 gubernatorial election for either Republican Edmund Morrill or Populist John Leedy because of their weak stance on enforcing prohibition.<sup>56</sup> The *Christian Herald* asked: "Which is the worse, the demonization of silver, or the dehumanization of humanity by legalized rum?"<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the Prohibition Party's platform supported the remonitization of silver, which was a central issue in the Populist platform.<sup>58</sup> The fact that Methodist newspapers endorsed the Prohibition Party's entire platform evidences that Methodists were comfortable with Bryan's stance on the silver issue.

Methodist dedication to prohibition is an important factor for understanding why Bryan won the 1896 election. Although the Populist Party did not take a formal stand on prohibition, it had many avid prohibitionists in its ranks.<sup>59</sup> The forerunner to the Populist Party, the Alliance, favored prohibition.<sup>60</sup> Jeremiah Botkin ran for Kansas governor as the Prohibition Party candidate in 1888. In 1890, it nominated John Willits, who strongly favored temperance, for governor. Ben S. Henderson, a notable prohibitionist, acted as the temporary chairperson of the Kansas Populist state convention. William Peffer, the first Populist Kansas senator, was a dry candidate and

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<sup>54</sup>*Official Minutes of the Northwest Kansas Conference* (Salina, KS: April 1-6, 1896), 20. The Southwest Conference had a similar sentiment: "That since the liquor traffic cannot be legalized without sin, neither can those who favor its legalization be voted for without sin, when it is an issue"; *Official Minutes of the Southwest Kansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Fourteenth Session* (Wichita, KS, March 25-30, 1896).

<sup>55</sup> "Address of the Bishops," *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Omaha, NE: May 2-16, 1896), 60.

<sup>56</sup> *Western Methodist* (October 29, 1896).

<sup>57</sup> *Christian Herald* (October, 1896).

<sup>58</sup> *Western Methodist* (July 3, 1896).

<sup>59</sup> Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: UP Kansas, 1986), 108.

<sup>60</sup> Clara Francis, "Prohibition in Kansas," *Kansas and Kansans*, 1143.

would later run for governor on the Prohibition Party ticket in 1898. Leroy Ashby, a Bryan biographer, wrote that: "Members of the Farmers' Alliances, and later of the Populist movement, were typically 'Bible people' to whom religion was both a source of comfort and a call to action. Strongly moralistic, often supporters of Prohibition, they staged political rallies that resembled religious camp meetings."<sup>61</sup>

The issue of prohibition also led Methodists to be dissatisfied with the Republican Party. Republicans had previously been known as the party of prohibition, but their failure to enforce temperance laws caused disruption in the party. For instance, in August, 1896, the *Kansas Temperance Monitor* reported that J. J. Stewart of the board of police commissioners refused to enforce the prohibition laws and "would rather be a Republican and do Wrong than a Methodist and do Right."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, there was a vocal anti-prohibition wing, also known as the Republican Resubmissionists, in the Republican Party that maintained strong support in the Wichita region. Both Populists and Republicans struggled with the issue, but the problem became so acute in the Republican camps that by 1894, they removed prohibition from their platform completely. The *Kansas Temperance Monitor* declared that "prohibition is doomed in the case of Republican success."<sup>63</sup>

The acceptance of the Prohibition Party's objectives by the Methodist newspapers, which otherwise refused to endorse any major ticket, indicates the importance of prohibition. One paper stated that the Prohibition Party platform "suits us so well, for real practical purposes."<sup>64</sup> In July, with the election just four months away, the *Western Methodist* stated that the Prohibition Party "is still faithfully battling for 'God, Home, and Native Land' regardless of any other distracting issue that may come up to divert them from their noble purpose."<sup>65</sup> Praise for fighting against the "liquor demons" was not restricted by political affiliation. After Georgia Populists adopted a prohibition platform, the *Christian Herald* praised their decision, adding that liquor "fosters the saloon and generates its manifold evils in consideration of revenue that pays less than a tithe of the public burdens it entails. It is non-American, monopolistic and essentially immoral."<sup>66</sup> Once again, Methodist beliefs paralleled Populist principles.

The Prohibition Party presidential candidate Joshua Levering enjoyed the most favorable praise of all the candidates in the Methodist press. However, the Baptist millionaire stood little chance to win nationwide, and the politically informed Kansas Methodist laity did not cast their votes to support him. In fact, Levering and the other small party candidates only received a com-

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<sup>61</sup> Leroy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 61.

<sup>62</sup> "The Republican Party and Prohibition," *Kansas Temperance Monitor* (Salina, KS; August, 1896).

<sup>63</sup> "The Republican Party and Prohibition."

<sup>64</sup> *Western Methodist* (July 30, 1896).

<sup>65</sup> *Western Methodist* (September 10, 1896).

<sup>66</sup> *Christian Herald* (September, 1896).

bined 1.1 percent of the total vote in the 1896 election in Kansas.<sup>67</sup> Levering aside, Methodist newspapers typically showed no direct approval for either Bryan or McKinley. In fact, the *Western Methodist* shared with its readers that all the presidential nominees are:

not only clean and honorable men, but are good Christian men . . . . McKinley is an active member, and we believe a local elder in the Methodist church at Canton. His private life and character as especially exemplified in his devotion to his invalid wife, are such as to win the admiration of all who know him. Hon. W. J. Bryan, of Nebraska, the nominee of democratic and populist parties, is a prominent and honored member of the Presbyterian Church, and a man whose life and character all young men would do well to emulate.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the candidates' personal integrity and devotion to their respective churches, each possessed qualities that, if known, would have significantly hurt their chances to win the state. For instance, Bryan, who never drank or smoked, campaigned against statewide prohibition in Nebraska as late as 1890 and secured many votes and funds from the liquor interests.<sup>69</sup> A son of a temperance worker and someone who personally abhorred the liquor traffic, Bryan was a political opportunist who ventured into saloons while one of his aides bought beer for potential immigrant voters.<sup>70</sup> McKinley was addicted to cigars, yet because he knew the political damage it would cause, he never appeared around photographers with one in his mouth.<sup>71</sup> Methodist newspapers, which certainly had an interest in any candidate's moral failures, did not report any of these stories. If the Methodist public had been informed about these personal issues, it could have resulted in a political disaster for a candidate. This is evident in a close call McKinley faced a month before the election. On October 8, the *Western Methodist* reported a rumor that Mrs. McKinley rented buildings used for saloon purposes. This rumor led the paper to "advocate the great temperance reform."<sup>72</sup> The rumor turned out to be false and was retracted in the following issue, but this story underscores the high regard Methodists placed on this single issue.<sup>73</sup>

Methodist newspapers identified each candidate's church affiliation, but they did not endorse the Methodist McKinley. The neutrality of Methodists helped Bryan to overcome the differences in church affiliation. In fact, the lack of emphasis on denominational labels provided by the Populist movement allowed Methodists to look to other denominations in their fight against liquor. For instance, Bryan's Presbyterian Church stated that "No political party has the right to expect the support of the Christian men so long as that

<sup>67</sup> Cabe, *Kansas Votes*, 22-23.

<sup>68</sup> *Western Methodist* (August 13, 1896).

<sup>69</sup> Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Kazin, *Godly Hero*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: Regents' Press of Kansas, 1980), 10.

<sup>72</sup> *Western Methodist* (October 8, 1896).

<sup>73</sup> The *Kansas Temperance Monitor* reported the same story less than a month before the election (October, 1896), but because the next issue did not come out until afterwards, no retraction was made.

party stands committed to the license policy, or refuses to put itself on record against[t] the saloon."<sup>74</sup> One Kansas Methodist leader commented that the idea of a multi-denominational temperance movement "is a wise one, and ought to be entered into with great earnestness."<sup>75</sup>

In addition to the unification provided by the issue of prohibition, the outcry against alleged Republican economic injustices in Kansas helped Bryan to victory. Kansas Populists continually identified McKinley and Hanna as corrupt easterners who preyed on the Kansas farmer, an association that disturbed Kansas Methodists due to their humanitarian disposition. Although this investigation has centered on Kansas, a similar result can be seen nationwide. Of the states where Methodism was the largest denomination or contained at least 25% of the people who identified a religious affiliation, 12 of 15 were won by Bryan.<sup>76</sup> Although the inflamed rhetoric against the eastern industrialist endeared Bryan to the agrarian minded states of the Midwest and South, it was less effective in the Great Lakes region and the Northeast, where McKinley prevailed. The Republican won, by and large, because of this success in the most populous states with the majority of electoral votes.

After the election concluded and McKinley took office, the Methodist Church was intent on returning to church business. The *Western Methodist* wrote that because "the exciting political campaign is over, for which we are truly thankful we expect to see a great and better campaign inaugurated at once: the kindling of revival fires all over the Kansas and Oklahoma prairies."<sup>77</sup> The *Wesleyan Advance* wrote "that it is evident that the American people have declared for the republican party, we believe that no obstacles should be placed in its way."<sup>78</sup> After the loss in the 1896 election, Populism failed to recover. The movement continued in Kansas, but as a noticeably weakened political force. In the same way that they had previously criticized Republicans, Methodists denounced the newly elected Kansas Populists for corruption and for their inability to enforce prohibition. Historians have attributed the downfall of the Populist movement to several factors, notably, its failure to become a national party, its fusion with Republicans and Democrats, and the nation's increased economic prosperity. Despite his defeat, Bryan did not remove himself from the political arena; he would run and fail two more times in bids for the presidency. In 1900, the Populist Party split its support between Bryan and Wharton Barker, thus removing a crucial voting block from Bryan's success in Kansas. Not until Woodrow Wilson's candidacy would the majority of Kansans again vote for another Democrat for president.

The 1896 presidential election in Kansas presents a strong correlation

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<sup>74</sup> *Kansas Temperance Monitor* (November, 1896).

<sup>75</sup> *Western Methodist* (October 8, 1896).

<sup>76</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States*, 1-49; Bryan ran not only as a Populist, but also as a Democrat, so he received substantial support in the solidly Democratic South.

<sup>77</sup> *Western Methodist* (November 5, 1896).

<sup>78</sup> *Wesleyan Advance*, (Salina, KS; November, 1896).

between politics and religion. Kansas voters witnessed a unique synergy of Populism, humanitarianism, and religion that produced an environment in which Methodists could cross denominational lines and support a man who spoke for the struggling farmer. The similarities in the message of the Populists, Methodists, and Bryan created a sense of political and religious unity in Kansas. One disapproving New York newspaper summed up Bryan's message as "bombastic phrases in Western Methodist camp-meeting style."<sup>79</sup> As is evident from this detraction and his loss in the election, Bryan's message was not embraced nationwide, but within Kansas, Methodists and Populists alike heralded his call for a humanitarian, God fearing government.

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<sup>79</sup> Cited in Kazin, *Godly Hero*, 77. In Ohio and Indiana, Bryan fared far better than the previous Democratic candidate James Garfield in 1892 not only in locations where Populism was more popular, but also in "concentrations of evangelical or pietist Republicans embraced another crusade for redemption and morality . . ." (Phillips, *William McKinley*, 83).