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“THE POPULIST CONTEXT: TEXAS COTTON FARMERS AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT, 1880-1900”

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A bustling trading town on the Brazos River, Waco, Texas served as the supply center and market for the cotton farmers of the adjoining districts. By wagon and rail, in 1893 farmers brought 180,000 bales of cotton to the Waco market. The town also claimed to be the “Athens of Texas” and the “City of Churches,” as it was the home of the Baptist Baylor University and the center of missionary educational work to win Texas to evangelical Christianity.¹ Today, the abundance of church spires and Christian academies would convince any twenty-first century visitors to the significance of Waco’s evangelical past. But what they may not know is that Waco was also the center of an intense religious conflict that came to a head on November 19, 1897. On that day, in broad daylight in the middle of town, two men ambushed County Judge George Bruce Gerald. Aiming at the Judge’s back, one of the bullets lodged in his arm and another bounced off the metal button on the Judge’s suspenders, giving him time to draw his six-shooter and kill his would-be assassins.

Judge Gerald had long been a thorn in the side of Baptist officialdom. In the early 1880s, he had turned his courtroom over to the weekly meetings of an association of secular free thinkers. But the Judge’s greatest affront was his

¹ Charles Cutter, *Cutter’s Guide to the City of Waco* (Waco: Padgitt’s Park Natatorium, 1894), 39.

outspoken defense of his friend William Cowpers Brann, the editor and publisher in Waco of the *Iconoclast* magazine, which devoted its pages to debunking the myths and exposing the hypocrisies of the Protestant churches. Angry members of the Baptist community sought to teach Brann a lesson. When Judge Gerald came to the editor's defense, they made their attempt on Gerald. Four months later, on April 1, 1898, a man seeking the favor of Baptist citizens shot the editor of the *Iconoclast* in the back as he walked along Waco's main street. Brann returned fire and both Brann and his assassin died the next day.²

In later decades, Waco's resident historians would explain these events as an episode in the town's "colorful" and "Wild West" past.³ The bloodshed on the streets of Waco, however, carried a deeper historical significance because it was part of a profound religious conflict that played out across the cotton districts of central and eastern Texas. Moreover, this conflict over belief and unbelief took place at the same time and in the same rural districts that were at the epicenter of the Populist revolt. The Farmers' Alliance movement first appeared in the cotton districts of central Texas, from which it grew by the end of the 1880s as an unprecedented national force of agrarian organization. The Farmers' Alliance provided the intellectual and organizational catalyst for the Populist farmer-labor coalition and the national

² George B. Gerald, "The Passing of William Cowper Brann," *Iconoclast*, vol. 8, no. 4 (May 1898), 74-6; "Fuller Williamson's Statement Made in Dr. Carl Lovelace's Office, Feb. 9, 1934," unpublished ms., Texas Collection, Baylor University; "Last Act of the Waco Tragedy," San Antonio, April 21, 1898, clipping, and "Brann, William Cowper," unpublished ms. in "William Cowper Brann," vertical file, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin; Charles Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast* (Austin, TX, 1957).

³ "G. B. Gerald Reowned as Jurist, Editor, Confederate Hero and Man of Courage," *Waco Tribune Herald*, October 30, 1949; "Lives of Lively Dissent," *Waco Tribune Herald*, May 14, 2007; Gary Cleve Wilson, "Bane of the Baptists," *Texas Monthly*, January, 1986.

People's Party, arguably the most powerful challenge to corporate power in U.S. history. What then was the relationship, if any, between the religious warfare and the Populist revolt? The scholarship has covered the challenges of markets, indebtedness, corporate power, and political abuse that framed the social and political contexts of the Populist revolt. The purpose of this paper is to examine another dimension of the Populist context, which was the religious conflict in central Texas that led to the bloodshed in Waco.

To do so requires probing some of the most durable myths about America's agrarian past and the historical meaning of the nation's rural/urban divide. In the wider political culture, this meaning has often been refracted through the lens of the Scopes "Monkey" Trial of 1925. John Scopes, a young science teacher, faced charges in the small town of Dayton Tennessee for violating the state law barring the teaching of evolution. The case turned into the "trial of the century." For the prosecution, it was William Jennings Bryan, a former congressman from Nebraska and three times the Democratic nominee for president. For over thirty years Bryan made headlines with his campaigns for popular social reforms. In the 1920s, he made common cause with Christian fundamentalists in their efforts to ban the teaching of evolution. On the defense team, it was Clarence Darrow, the famous Chicago attorney, urbane, cosmopolitan, skeptical, and agnostic. At the time, the journalist H. L. Mencken framed the trial as a "religious orgy," with a rural "Homo Neanderthalensis" wielding "the anthropomorphic religion of an elder day" against the enlightened urban minority.⁴ History textbooks would later mark the trial as

⁴ *Baltimore Evening Sun*, June 29, 1925; *The Nation*, July 1, 1925.

“the last hold out of the nineteenth century” in the face of modern urban America. Despite the evidence that Tennessee voters were divided over the anti-evolution law, and that the opposition to the law was as strong in rural districts as urban ones, the trial forged the link in the nation’s myths and memories between fundamentalist or traditional religion and rural people.⁵

Moreover, in the political culture, the Scopes Trial linked fundamentalist religion to Populist reform. William Jennings Bryan had advocated silver inflation and other reforms sought by farmers and, although he was a life-long Democrat and won the Democratic nomination for the presidency in 1896, his candidacy had also been endorsed by the People’s Party. Hence, if Bryan at the Scopes Trial represented the “shabbiness of the Evangelical mind,” as Richard Hofstadter so delicately put it, Populism came to represent much the same.⁶ Ever since the Scopes Trial rural Populism and fundamentalist or traditional Protestantism have been closely intertwined in historical memory. Indeed, in the scholarship of American political culture and reform, evangelical piety has served as the sheet anchor tying Populism and agrarian protest to a traditional past.⁷

For more than half a century, the nature of the Populist movement has represented a sharp point of scholarly controversy. In the 1950s, Richard Hofstadter

⁵ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997), 50, 56, 236.

⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 288.

⁷ Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever? Tennessee v. John Scopes* (Boston: Beacon, 1958, reprint, New York: Oxford, 1970), 16, 223; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion, An American History* (New York: Basic, 1995), 106, and *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, Knopf, 2006), 303-04 ; John L. Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and the Adversary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1963), 333; Kevin P. Phillips, *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1982), 181.

at Columbia and an influential set of American intellectuals, concerned about the origins of fascism in Europe, looked back at Populism to see if it might contain seeds of irrational, intolerant, and anti-Semitic mass politics. Sure enough, that is just what they found. Hofstadter drew the conclusion that the Populists were backward looking and delusional, a rural people psychologically unable to cope with the demands of a modern society.⁸ Quite different concerns animated the historians of the 1970s and 1980s. Their point of reference was the grass-roots activism of the Civil Rights Movement. Historians such as Lawrence Goodwyn and Christopher Lasch saw Populism as the 1960s culture writ large. Populism, as they saw it, provided historical confirmation of their own ideas about grass-roots democracy and the failings of a hierarchical and commercial culture. Populism, they argued, was driven by the democratic response of rural people taking a stand to defend their traditional world – family, community, and church – from a modern invasion of businessmen seeking development.⁹ The key thing to understand about these sharply different views – Populism as proto-fascism versus Populism as the last best hope for grass-roots democracy – is that they are both founded on a common

⁸ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 12-22, 46-47; Victor Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 10 (1957), 350-57; Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 90-99.

⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford, 1976), 612-14, and *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford, 1978), ix and xxi; Christopher Lasch, "The Populist Campaign Against 'Improvement,'" in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 168-225, and "Communitarianism or Populism," in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 92-114; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism, Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford, 1985); Bruce Palmer, *"Man Over Money": The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980).

premise: The Populists were tradition-bound people in revolt against modernity and progress.

In the usual narrative of American development, Populism has been placed on the teleological track from the agrarian *Gemeinschaft* of local, self-sufficient, mutualist community, to the urban *Gesellschaft* of centralized, commercial, bureaucratic society. My book, *The Populist Vision*, has challenged that narrative. It questions the assumptions that locate Populism in the context of rural traditionalism, and reconsiders exactly who was modern and who was not. In the process, a very different Populism comes into view. This is a Populism that represented, at its core, a vast movement of rural education, a movement that brought often marginally literate men and women into institutes, classrooms, book clubs, and lecture series, where they studied political economy, history, and farming technique and business methods, along with the natural and social sciences including the latest findings of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin and other evolutionary theorists. This is a Populism that mobilized hundreds of thousands of women demanding education, professional employment, and freedom from traditional restraints. This is a Populism that pioneered highly centralized and technologically advanced cooperative marketing systems that would serve as a cornerstone of modern agribusiness. This is a Populism that transcended localism and regionalism, representing a nationalist movement of Southern cotton farmers and Great Plains grain producers, as well as California and Florida fruit growers, Midwestern coal miners and railway employees, and urban middle class reformers in Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco. This is a Populism that stood on a

platform that called for the expansion of the national government on the model of the postal system, the central government's largest bureaucracy. This was a Populism that sought to make use of telecommunications, steam power, and economies of scale to build what they perceived as a more just and equitable model of modern development.

For a working definition of the concept *modern*, I relied in my research on Marshal Berman's rendering of *The Communist Manifesto*. "All that is solid melts into air" within the context of a global market facilitated by "technologically sophisticated communications." Moreover, modernity also implies a certain type of people who seek innovation and change. As Berman puts it, they "look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men."¹⁰ My research concludes: "The Populists were just this kind of people. They sought to improve their domestic economy and their national government. They sought renewal in local schoolhouses and federal credit systems. They sought to refashion associational ties with neighbors and commercial relations with the world. They sought new techniques, new acreage, and new avenues of spiritual expression."¹¹

In other words, the Populists were rural moderns. But they were more than that, as their innovative efforts had a determined, pointed edge. James Scott has applied the concept of *high modernism* to describe an outlook that is "best conceived as a strong (one might even say muscle-bound) version of the beliefs in scientific

¹⁰ Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982, reprint, New York: Penguin, 1988), 90-96.

¹¹ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 10.

and technical progress,” especially as applied by the state, and shows “a supreme self-confidence about continued lineal progress.”¹² In the American context, scholars have used Scott’s concept to discuss urban leaders – college professors, government agents, and business executives – who, in the 1920s and 1930s, brought “agriculture kicking and screaming into the modern world.”¹³ But my research points in a different direction – to rural “high moderns.” Post Civil War America produced a wave of agrarian movements, culminating in Populism, that might be best described as *high modernist* as Scott defines the term. The men and women of the Populist leadership, along with the grass-roots rural lecturers and organizers, displayed a “muscle-bound” faith in science, technology, and progress. They enjoyed enormous self-confidence that progress was lineal and knowable. And they believed in the human capacity, by means of the state and otherwise, to harness nature in the service of ever-rising social improvement.

The historian Robert McMath, Jr. points out that after reading *The Populist Vision* “it is tempting to cite Dorothy’s comment to her little dog after the cyclone had deposited them in Oz: ‘Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.’”¹⁴ Placing agrarian *high modernism* into the nineteenth-century rural world of American myth, legend, and prevailing scholarship can prove disorienting. The dissonance is especially

¹² James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), 89-90.

¹³ Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 6-7, 77, and “Accounting for Change,” in Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston, eds, *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2001), 189-212.

¹⁴ Robert C. McMath, Jr., “Another Look at the ‘Hard Side’ of Populism,” *Reviews in American History*, vol. 36, no. 2 (June 2008), and “*The Populist Vision*: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Kansas History*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 18-45.

acute when it comes to religion. Historical memory and much of our historical scholarship assumes a ubiquitous presence of evangelical faith in the rural heartland, an assumption that is hard to square with my claims of the innovative and scientific nature of Populist belief and unbelief . My original research focused on the Populist interior, the literature, correspondence, lecture notes, minute books, diaries, and memoirs left behind by the leaders as well as the grass roots “organic intellectuals” of the movement. The purpose of this paper is to look more closely at the religious environment in which the modernizing project of rural Populism emerged.

Religion, as with every other part of human experience, is historically contingent. What was the historical specificity of the religious context that shaped the Populist movement? Addressing this question sheds light on the moral frameworks of late nineteenth-century reform movements, the relationships between plebian religion and plebian politics, as well as the nature of the rural/urban divide. It is a complex question to research. Populism was a social movement involving millions of people, numerous contradictory trends and cross currents spread across a continent with wide variation by region and place. In California, the Populists emerged in an environment characterized by broad indifference about religious concerns, and those that were most politically influential on the Populist movement tended to be what are known today as New Age interests in metaphysics and Eastern philosophies. In Kansas, the Populists reflected especially acrimonious rural resentments against the churches and “churchianity.” North Carolina had the peculiar combination of both a strong

Populist movement and strongly established churches.¹⁵ Texas was the storm center of the Populist revolt and was also rife with religious controversies that broke into public politics (and public violence) and left a telling historical record.

The Rev. H. S. Thrall, in charge of Methodist missionary work in Texas, described the state in the late 1880s as “unoccupied territory,” where a mobile population had “children as ignorant of Christianity as though they had been born heathens.”¹⁶ The 1890 Census seemed to confirm Thrall’s assessment. Out of a population of 2,235,527, a seventy percent majority did not belong to a church or religious order. The level of church membership was higher in the cities and towns, in some districts with large numbers of Mexican Catholics, and among some immigrant communities. But connections to organized religion grew thin in the rural districts of central and eastern Texas where the Populist movement had its greatest strength.¹⁷ The mainly English-speaking farmers and tenants of these districts were often new arrivals, and although most of them came from Protestant backgrounds, many settlers had lost organized connections to the churches and creeds that they once might have had back in Georgia or North Carolina from whence they came. There was also a racial dimension. With the defeat of

¹⁵ With his research focus on North Carolina, Joe Creech draws the conclusion that evangelical religion was the motive force behind the Populist revolt. While overstating the case, this conclusion also reflects the peculiarities of North Carolina. *Righteous Indignation: Religion & the Populist Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2006).

¹⁶ *Texas Christian Advocate* (Galveston, TX), January 27, 1887.

¹⁷ *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), 48, 81, 245-6.

Reconstruction and the destruction of African-American political organizations, African-American farmers and tenants may have proved more successful than their white counterparts in setting up and maintaining church networks.

In her study of the origins of the Bible Belt, Christine Heyrman reminds us that the ante-bellum evangelical conquest of the South involved innovation and conflict, and was undertaken by evangelical missionaries from New England and across the Atlantic who encountered hostility and resistance from the local populace.¹⁸ The cycle of conquest continued in Texas. Under Mexican rule, when Anglo-American settlers were discouraged from bringing Protestantism into Texas, Stephen Austin considered that “one Methodist preacher” would cause more damage to American settlement “than a dozen horse thieves.”¹⁹ After annexation, most settlers showed little interest in religious matters, yet the early missionaries made determined efforts. This included the great grandfather of Lyndon Baines Johnson, George Washington Baines, who worked as a Baptist missionary for the New York Home Mission Society, and served in the 1860s as the president of Baylor University.²⁰ After attending Baylor and studying with Baines, the parson Henry Renfro took up farming and missionary work in the Cross Timbers district, where he wrote to “Brother Baines” about the lack of water for Baptisms, the lack of a single

¹⁸ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997).

¹⁹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “,” <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/RR/izrdf.html> (accessed January 21, 2010).

²⁰ Robert Caro, *The Path to Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 50.

minister in the county, and where an itinerant minister “comes sixty miles to preach at this church.”²¹

Still, the Baptists and Methodists had the upper hand when it came to missionary work, but the Presbyterians and other evangelicals were also in the field. So too were Swedenborgians, Unitarians, Spiritualists, Free Thinkers, and other unorthodox and iconoclastic creeds. Missionaries of every stripe viewed Texas as “unoccupied territory” because the great majority of rural people were outside of any fold and, perhaps more importantly, the weakness of established churches opened the doors for upheaval and innovation. Albert Francisco served as a missionary for the Swedenborgian New Church, a group inspired by the metaphysical and rationalist philosophy of the Swedish scientist and inventor Emanuel Swedenborg. After touring the state, Francisco reported back to his church officers that Texas offered the greatest opportunity for missions in the country, because “there is a great revolution going on here.”²²

In their wide variety, the missionaries fanning out across the Texas countryside tended to focus on winning over the same ethno-cultural group. The rural people that they sought to convert were mainly not Indians, Mexicans, or, for that matter, Germans, Bohemians, or other immigrants, but the native-born, English-speaking farmers who comprised the demographic majority in the state. This majority sustained elements of Protestant culture and probably showed less “ignorance of Christianity” than claimed in the excited reports of the missionaries.

²¹ Henry Renfro, Letter to the Editor, *The Texas Baptist*, September 2, 1856, in William Clark Griggs, *Parson Henry Renfro: Free Thinking on the Texas Frontier* (Austin, 1994), 11-15.

²² Keith Lynn King, “Religious Dimensions of the Agrarian Protest in Texas, 1870-1908,” PhD diss., University of Illinois King, “Religious Dimensions,” 163.

Many desolate farm cabins had a Bible on the shelf, the text from which farm children often learned their letters. Farm women often considered bible reading an obligation as much as the household chores. In that context, biblical references and bible stories were woven closely into how rural people discussed and argued, across the spectrum of belief and unbelief.

Missionaries also used similar methods of recruiting as, for example, in their use of camp meetings. Revival encampments where missionaries preached under big tents to potential converts served as a means by which the evangelicals had conquered the South in a previous generation. In late nineteenth century Texas, the camp meeting was an attractive form for rural people, and the missionaries made the most of it. A camp meeting by a forest spring or on the banks of the Brazos River provided a cool place for farm families to rest and socialize during the summer heat.²³ They also gave farmers the opportunity to be entertained and informed by talented speakers on behalf of a wide choice of creeds and beliefs. Under the camp meeting tent, farmers might listen to the Presbyterian minister William B. Bloys. Trained for the ministry in Illinois, Bloys had hoped “to serve the Lord in India,” but because of his poor health his church had sent him to Texas instead. He held his first camp meeting at Skillman Grove outside of Fort Davis, reporting that of forty-six participants, only one adult man and five women were “professing Christians.”²⁴ Exactly what Bloys meant by the claim that the other forty were not “professing Christians” is unclear. The claim suggests, however, that an element of novelty and

²³ “Revival News,” *Texas Christian Advocate* (Galveston, TX), August 25, 1883.

²⁴ “The True Story About the First Camp Meeting Held October 10th, 1890, at Skillman Grove,” unpublished ms., and “Cove Spring Camp Meetin,” in “Camp meetings” vertical file, Center for American History, Austin, Texas.

discovery was one of the attractions of the camp meeting. Indeed, the Spiritualists, held well-attended rural camp meetings in central Texas that were not explicitly Christian at all, but drew a large rural following to witness presentations by both male and female mediums explaining the science and practice of communicating with the dead.²⁵

The camp meeting, with its low overhead costs and with clean water and cool shade providing the essential infrastructure, allowed the Spiritualists and other unorthodox groups to compete with the more orthodox Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelicals. The unorthodox movements had one other factor working for them. During the late nineteenth century the mainline evangelical churches were consumed by internal conflict. In 1891, Thomas Dewitt Talmage the famed Presbyterian clergyman noted from his Brooklyn, New York, ministry that: “this is a time of resounding ecclesiastical quarrel. Never within your memory or mine has the air been so full of missiles.”²⁶ The Protestant churches had their usual inter-denominational disputes over the usual issues such as the techniques and timing of baptism, the role of the clergy, and whether it was a pre or post-millennial age. But the “resounding ecclesiastical quarrel” that Talmage referenced involved what the Texas churches considered the pressing issues of the time.

Instructions sent to the Methodist’s International Sunday School went to the heart of the crisis. How were the faithful to teach children the Gospel in a time when “skeptical critics have attempted to prove the Mosaic books to be the product of the

²⁵ “In Camp. The Day With the Spiritualists at Oak Cliff,” *Daily Times Herald* (Dallas, TX), September 1, 2, 4, 6, 1896.

²⁶ *Caucasian* (Clinton, NC), September 28, 1893.

priestly age”? How to confront “the so-called modern scientific and critical objections to the book of Genesis”? As such views could no longer be kept from the students, or easily refuted except by theologians of higher training, the instructions suggested that Sunday school teachers be reminded that “every thoughtful child knows by his conscience that he is a sinner,” and thereby change the subject. But the subject could not be so easily changed.²⁷ Discoveries in biology and physics, and the influence of social evolutionary thinking, gave a new moral authority to empirical evidence and rational inquiry. Science and reason were looked on as the new arbiters of morality and truth. The resonance of Higher Criticism meant that the Bible was increasingly subject to the same critical standard, which, among other things, meant that Jesus as manly God had to contend with the notion of Jesus as a godly man. Meanwhile, as the Texas Methodists warned, “Infidelity is fond of comparing Christianity with other religions,” as global interconnections also spread knowledge of non-Christian beliefs. In 1893, the Protestant churches organized a World Parliament of Religions to coincide with the Chicago Worlds Fair. Over a hundred and fifty thousand people took part in its sessions, comparing notes with representatives from across Asia and the Middle East about Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, and Mohammed.²⁸

Moreover, the social crises of the 1880s and 90s further exacerbated the “ecclesiastical quarrel.” The yawning gap between rich and poor, and the powerful

²⁷ *Texas Christian Advocate*, January 13, 1887.

²⁸ *Texas Christian Advocate*, August 25, 1883; Max Muller, “The Real Significance of the Parliament of Religions,” *Arena* 11 (1894), 1-14; Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1995).

rise of plebian social movements posed the political dilemma: were the churches about the future afterlife or saving humanity in the here and now? Was Jesus the savior of individual souls or was he the carpenter who sought social justice for the poor? The conflicts over how to adapt to this new intellectual and political environment played out within national denominations. They raged in the elite seminaries in Chicago, New York, and Princeton, producing the “New Theology,” as urban middle class reformers aligned with a Social Gospel.

The same forces were at work within the evangelical movements in Texas, stimulating sharp polemics, heresy trials, reforms, and schisms, as well as religious indifference and unbelief . The clergy at Baylor University feared “grave and dangerous” heretics working their “ruinous teaching” within the church.²⁹ The University itself faced not only the competition from “cheap and showy” Catholic schools, but especially from the system of public education, that “is being manipulated by Infidels & Godless men for the ruin of our Children & Texas.”³⁰ At root of the problems confronting Christianity in Texas, according to the Baptist leadership, was the ability of infidels to exploit ignorance of Divine Revelation. The Rev. Benajah H. Carroll taught at Baylor, ministered the First Baptist Church in Waco, and was the most powerful Baptist theologian in the state. As a younger man, Carroll ridiculed religion and considered himself a “committed infidel” prior to a camp meeting conversion. As a late convert to the cause, he waded into one religious

²⁹ W. E. Penn, Trenton, TN, to Rev. B. H. Carroll, Waco, TX, April 18, 1889, B. H. Carroll Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

³⁰ Rufus C. Burleson and T. E. Muse, undated letter to Committee on Schools and Education, Rufus C. Burleson Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

controversy after the next to “raise the standard” of orthodoxy.³¹ In 1884 he delivered a much-publicized sermon entitled “The Agnostic,” hundreds of copies of which were handed out free on the streets of Waco. In the sermon Carroll analyzed an “infidel tide which pushes its chilling waves over the earth.” The source of this tide was the promiscuous spread of the “evolution hypothesis.” Hiding behind the fashionable views of Spencer, Darwin, Huxley, Buckle, and John Stuart Mill, Carroll warned, “the enemy” kept the people in ignorance of their God.³²

Indifference, however, compounded ignorance. Too many Texans drifted away from religion and belief because of lack of interest. The missionary Rev. H. S. Thrall viewed religious indifference to be the most challenging obstacle to winning souls in Texas. He also realized that the spread of unbelief was the dangerous corollary to agrarian and labor unrest. “Such crimes as boycotting, fence cutting and strikes,” Thrall noted, “are new phases in Texas society. This is not all. There is a constantly increasing class of people indifferent to the gospel.” “Indifference,” Thrall concluded, “was the enemy to be conquered.”³³

One such conquest took place in the small Bowie County town of Ingersoll in the northeast corner of the state. In the 1870s, the original settlers named their town in honor of the agnostic Robert G. Ingersoll, who made his name as a fiery critic of Christianity and other “superstitious religions.” A disciple of Voltaire,

³¹ Keith Lynn Cogburn, “B. H. Carroll and Controversy: A Study of His Leadership among Texas Baptists, 1871-1899,” MA thesis, Baylor University, 1983.

³² Benajah H. Carroll, “The Agnostic. A Sermon. Delivered in the Baptist Church, Waco, Texas, Sunday, June 1, 1884 (Gatesville, TX: Advance, 1884), 4, 21. James B. Cranfill, “Shaw: Free Thinker and Biographer of Brann,” unpublished ms c1929, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

³³ *Texas Christian Advocate* (Galveston, TX), January 27, 1887.

Ingersoll translated Enlightenment rationalism into the American vernacular. He was perhaps the single most popular orator in the country, and his highly moralistic message of human solidarity resonated within the ranks of rural and labor reform.³⁴ Eugene Debs would describe Ingersoll's faith as "love and service and consecration of humanity."³⁵ As historian James Turner explained the general context, "moralism was the peak that stood still, prominent in its isolation, after other beliefs had eroded."³⁶ Here it must be stressed that in the eyes of many Texans Ingersoll had significant strikes against him. He was a former abolitionist and colonel in the Union Army, a friend of Frederick Douglass and advocate of civil rights for African Americans, a Republican Party power broker, and a New York corporate lawyer employed by some of the most resented railroad corporations. Not surprisingly, to name a town after "the Great Agnostic" was a red flag to Protestant missionaries, who in 1886 successfully targeted the town for a revival, in the wake of which the town was rechristened Redwater.³⁷ But the Ingersoll phenomenon continued to attract attention in the Lone Star state. In 1896, Ingersoll took his crusade to Texas, and families piled into wagons and traveled from distant farms to hear his secular message of human love and his sharp-tongued refutations of the Bible.³⁸

³⁴ *Kansas Farmer* (Topeka), July 7, 1887; *Farmer & Mechanic* (Raleigh), December 6, 1877; *Caucasian* (Clinton, North Carolina), February 18, 1892.

³⁵ Eugene V. Debs, "Recollections of Ingersoll," *Pearson's Magazine* (April 1917).

³⁶ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985), 203.

³⁷ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. ", "

<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/RR/hlr8.html> (accessed November 4, 2009).

³⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, February 2, 1896.

Ingersoll's presence in Texas provides a window into the religious politics of the time, a politics that has been largely missed in the study of rural and working class Americans. Following the lead of E. P. Thompson, social and labor historians of the 1970s and 1980s rediscovered the religiosity of the common folk of the nation's fields and workshops. Just as E. P. Thompson demonstrated that Methodism was the traditional religion of the London laborer, it was understood that the toilers in the American heartland were reared in the tradition of the churches and steeped in the conventions of piety.³⁹ But too often the rural world they painted tended towards static and essentialist traditionalism. The invocation of the Protestant evangelical tradition became something of a talisman of historical analysis. The conflictive, dynamic, innovative, modern elements that produced the ideological storms sweeping across agrarian landscapes simply did not fit into what might be called a Thompsonian framework of traditional rural resistance to secular modernity.

Here another key insight of E. P. Thompson's comes into play. Referring to English Methodism, Thompson observed that evangelicals were "highly politically conscious religions." With the emergence of plebian politics, he noted, there was a "drastic reorientation of hatred," away from "Sin and the Pope" and towards unbelief, free thought, and Tom Paine, who held up a radicalism with a moral religion "to do good." Popular Methodism in England evolved in tension with this pole.⁴⁰ It might be said that Ingersoll was no Tom Paine; he surely was more

³⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), 350-400; Herbert Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement," *Work Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1966), 79-117; Robert C. McMath, Jr., "Populist Base Communities: The Evangelical Roots of Farm Protest in Texas," *Locus* 1 (1988), 53-63.

⁴⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 96, 391-2.

conservative politically. But the parallel is still suggestive: the “ecclesiastical quarrels” within rural evangelicalism evolved in a similar tension with the pole of free thought and unbelief. ⁴¹

James D. Shaw, as a former Methodist minister, lacked Ingersoll’s fame, biting wit and florid oratory. But he had a similar reputation for moral integrity, and was the Lone Star State’s most respected and influential secularist. Shaw had ministered over Waco’s Fifth Street Church, the most prominent Methodist congregation in central Texas. In September of 1882 he gave a sermon that headlined the newspapers and created a sensation from the streets of Waco to the remote corners of rural Texas.⁴² The newspapers reported that Shaw, “rejects the absolute inspiration of the scripture, the atonement, the saving power of faith, etc., and accepts the teachings of Christ as a higher human philosophy.” In November of 1882, the Northwest Conference of the Methodist Church, meeting in Cleburne, Texas, accused Shaw of advocating views “detrimental to religion and injurious to the church,” and proceeded to strip the convicted heretic of his church positions. In December, Shaw set up a Religious and Benevolent Association for the purposes of conducting charitable work and of discussing liberal ideas about religion and

⁴¹ In recent decades, Robert Ingersoll has been effectively airbrushed from history books or reduced to a comic footnote, but no person loomed larger over the post-Civil War religious conflicts. Margaret Sanger observed that the hundred-year battle for religious liberty “came to a climax in the career of Robert G. Ingersoll.” Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Truth, 1920), 187-88. Eugene Debs described Ingersoll as “the most talked about man in America,” who had done more to improve the human condition than any man in any age. Eugene V. Debs to Eva Parker Ingersoll, July 23, 1906, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 1, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 185-86, 229; Eugene V. Debs, “Recollections of Ingersoll,” *Pearson’s Magazine* (April 1917).

⁴² James B. Cranfill, “Shaw: Free Thinker and Biographer of Brann,” unpublished ms c1929, Texas Collection, Baylor University; Virginia Ming, “J. D. Shaw: Freethinker,” *Waco Heritage & History* vol. 10, no. 2 (summer 1979), 1-21.

morality. Sympathizing with Shaw's efforts, the County Judge George Bruce Gerald invited the new association to hold its Sunday meetings in his courtroom. In 1884 Shaw constructed Liberal Hall for his congregation, and here he published the *Independent Pulpit*, a journal devoted to free thought. Shaw's reputation grew across the state and the country. He shared the stage with Robert Ingersoll at the 1885 national convention of the American Secular Union held in Cleveland. In what the Texas clergy described as the clash between the "Calvinists" and the "Ingersollites," Shaw had emerged as a key figure on the liberal side.⁴³

Liberal Hall sponsored lectures and symposia covering a broad terrain of history, philosophy, and science. Guests included Spiritualist mediums and Jewish rabbis. The *Independent Pulpit* reported on the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and debates on the relationship between religion and women's rights. It discussed the latest works of Spencer and comparative and world religions. With three thousand subscribers, the *Independent Pulpit* was one of Waco's most successful religious publications and Liberal Hall housed one of its largest congregations, whose membership included Judge George and other respected professionals. Shaw meanwhile lectured across the state to promote his cause. He spoke in the senate

⁴³ Griggs, *Free Thought on the Texas Frontier*, 120-23; "Calvin and Ingersoll," *Independent Pulpit* (Waco, TX), vol. 6, no. 4 (August 1883), 5, vol. 2, no. 2 (January 1885), 127, vol. 3., no. 9 (November 1885), 98-116.

Variations on the term "Ingersollite" or "Ingersollism" were commonly used in Texas at least since 1880, when the Methodist Rev. G. W. Briggs delivered a widely publicized lecture titled "Ingersoll and Ingersollism." *A Defense of Free Thought: Being a Protest and Reply to a Lecture Delivered in the Galveston Opera House, May 13, 1880, by the Rev. G. W. Briggs, By an Agnostic* (Galveston, TX, 1890).

chamber of the Texas legislature in Austin, and his lectures packed courthouses and opera houses in cities and towns throughout Texas.⁴⁴

Shaw also traveled extensively to the small towns and villages of central Texas, meeting in farmers' homes and rural schoolhouses. He visited the Cross Timbers district, the birthplace of the Farmers' Alliance, to help celebrate the eighth anniversary of the "Association of Freethinkers of Bell County," which was the first organization of free thinkers in Texas. Associations committed to what was known as "liberalism," "secularism," or "free thought" flourished in such places during the post-Civil War decades, despite occasional hostility of Protestant citizens. In 1877, the president of the Bell County association, Dr. Levi James Russell, had been captured, stripped, and savagely whipped by a group of his Christian neighbors.⁴⁵ Shaw's lecture circuit aimed to encourage the rural associations. A typical note from "The Lecture Field" reported on a visit to Moscow in Polk County, where "on Sunday morning the crowd was too large for the school house" so the free thinkers were invited to use the Baptist church. On that same trip, Shaw "drove to the house of Mr. T. S. Gay, a sturdy farmer who evolved into Liberalism from Primitive Baptist Faith."⁴⁶ The *Independent Pulpit* regularly reported on such conversion stories. "I formerly believed in the doctrines taught by the Methodists," explained N. D. Morris of Duncanville, "but through a process of reasoning I became convinced that I was

⁴⁴ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 1, no. 6 (August 1883), 4, vol. 1, no. 10 (January 1884), 8, vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1885), 7, 10-11, vol. 3, no. 12 (February 1886), 137, vol. 4, no. 1 (March 1886), 4-6, 30-32, vol. 4, no. 5 (July 1886), 104.

⁴⁵ Blake W. Barrow, "Freethought in Texas: J. D. Shaw and the *Independent Pulpit*," MA thesis, Baylor University, 1983, 133; William Clark Griggs, *Parson Henry Renfro: Free Thinking on the Texas Frontier* (Austin, 1994), 118-19

⁴⁶ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 4, no. 7 (October 1886), 187.

traveling in the wrong course to obtain happiness.”⁴⁷ An eighty-four year old man from Lamar County wrote “I found the Methodist church when I was fifteen.... I thought that it was my duty to rely on the blood of Jesus. I am, *now*, ashamed of such a doctrine.”⁴⁸ M. M. Clack of Bastrop County wrote to Shaw, “whilst I have ever respected the earnestness of your convictions, I have been too religious to cast my nickels in your missionary box. But it is a progressive age – times change and we change... Here is a dollar.”⁴⁹

One of the most compelling conversion testimonies came from the Rev. Henry Renfro, the former Baylor student who by the 1880s was a well-respected minister and farmer in Johnson County. In a May 1884 letter to the *Independent Pulpit* he explained his trajectory out of the church:

Here I am farming, attending to horses, cattle, sheep and hogs, my mind still more burdened than my body, asking and answering a thousand questions about the Bible, Christianity, church trials, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, till I have not had one moment to spare to let you know how I am getting along with my sore warfare against the world, the flesh and the devil.... I am out of the Baptist church. Regularly tried upon the charge of infidelity, I was turned over to the buffeting of satan.... My habit was to read but little, work hard all the week, and then trust to the reflections and meditations of a morning’s ride... to help me through ... sermon on Sunday. For the last two or three years, I have been reading considerably for a man of my hurried life, and all that while my doubts have been growing stronger and stronger, till now, I am woefully skeptical. I have learned this fact, that to read is to think, to think is to investigate, to investigate is to doubt, and to doubt is to be damned by orthodox churches.⁵⁰

Renfro had searched for answers in the works of Spinoza, Paine, and Ingersoll. His reputation for moral courage only grew among his neighbors when his

⁴⁷ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 2, no. 7 (September 1884), 68.

⁴⁸ *Independent Pulpit*, vol.1, no. 7 (September 1883), 10.

⁴⁹ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 1, no. 12 (February 1884), 5.

⁵⁰ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 2, no. 3 (May 1884), 34.

reading led to his expulsion from the church. After his trial, farmers in the district packed into the Alvarado opera house in “the largest audience ever gathered there” to hear what he had to say.⁵¹

Free thinkers such as James Shaw and Henry Renfro toppled orthodoxies, but they always did so with a polite respect for both friend and foe. By contrast, William Cowper Brann attacked the religiously orthodox by way of fierce journalistic assault. Brought up on a farm in downstate Illinois, as a young man he worked as a fireman on Texas freight trains and as a pitcher on a semi-professional baseball team. He found his calling writing columns for a number of Texas newspapers. Although he had little formal education, his study of literature extended from the ancient classics to McCauley, Carlisle, and Tom Paine. Taking an interest in financial reform, he popularized a semi-Populist system for an expanded currency. His talents and passions, however, led him to focus on literary, social, and religious criticism. In 1895, from his Waco office, he launched the *Iconoclast* as a monthly magazine devoted to these issues.⁵²

Brann employed a system of biting sarcasm and destructive insult, which he regularly aimed at the “pharisaical plutocrats” of the Protestant churches. He abused De Witt Talmage as “a monstrous bag of fetid wind,” observing that “the man who can find intellectual food in Talmadge’s sermons could acquire a case of delirium tremens by drinking the froth out of a pop bottle.” For his own spiritual

⁵¹ William Clark Griggs, *Parson Henry Renfro: Free Thinking on the Texas Frontier* (Austin, 1994), 118-19, 123-25, 190; *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1884), 5.

⁵² Brann reportedly lost \$27,000 in bets when his candidate William Jennings Bryan lost the 1896 presidential election. Andy Kopplin, “W. C. Brann, A Texas Iconoclast,” *Texas Historian* (May 1981), Wm. Cowper Brann vertical file, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin; Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast*, 18-26.

nourishment, Brann pointed to the “Sacred Books of all centuries [which] are essentially the same – the half articulate voice of the world crying for light... the old testament and the new, the Koran and the sacred Vedas, the northern Sagas and the southern mythologies... I sit with Siddartha beneath the Bodhi tree and follow the prophet of Islam in all his pilgrimages; I stand with Moses on Sinai’s flaming crest and listen to the prayer of Christ in the Garden of Gehtsemane.”⁵³ Such challenges to religious orthodoxy alarmed Waco’s Baptist officialdom, but drew a fascinated readership. The *Iconoclast* quickly emerged as a publishing phenomenon. With over 90,000 subscribers, Brann would claim the *Iconoclast* was “The only American magazine that secured 100,000 readers in a single year.” Some subscriptions were mailed to addresses across the country and around the globe, but tens of thousands of bundled copies of the *Iconoclast* arrived in hundreds of rural post offices across Texas.⁵⁴

Brann befriended James Shaw, Judge George and other free thinkers, yet he viewed himself as an advocate of a broad-minded Christianity. In a public letter addressed to Robert Ingersoll, Brann rejected as a “foolish falsehood” that “because Almighty God has not seen proper to reveal himself in all supernal splendor to Messrs. Hume and Voltaire, Paine and Ingersoll the world has no good reason for belief in his existence.” At the same time, he added that Ingersoll had “done more to

⁵³ Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast*, 41-3.

⁵⁴ Martin Joseph Dawson, “Image-Breaker Brann Six Decades After,” *Southwest Review* (Spring 1958), 148-58; Fred Whitehead and Verle Muhrer, *Free-thought on the American Frontier* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1992), 155.

intellectualize and humanize man's conception of Almighty God, than any reformer since the days of Christ."⁵⁵

Despite the bitterness of his journalistic attacks on the Baylor University hierarchy, Brann also wanted to "make Baylor better." He admired the Baptist minister Thomas Dixon, Jr., who, like Brann, embraced a "broad-minded" and self-consciously progressive faith. Born and raised in North Carolina, Dixon would later gain fame and fortune as the author of the white supremacist novels, *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*, on which D. W. Griffith would base his epic film *Birth of a Nation*. But in the early 1890s Dixon was at the zenith of his career as a reform-minded evangelical. With his services much in demand, he ministered the Dudley Street Church in Boston and the 23rd Street Baptist Church in Manhattan. From these high-profile venues he advocated recasting religion in "the language of modern life, grateful for all of the light of science, philosophy, and criticism."⁵⁶ Dixon defined his progressive faith as being "in life and death struggle with tradition and bigotry." Here it must be stressed that when Dixon attacked bigotry, he meant religious intolerance. As for his virulent racism and white nationalism, Dixon justified white supremacy as the dictate of progress and modern science. So did Brann, who wrote blood-curdling jeremiads about "the Negro rape-fiend." For Brann, too, African Americans were perceived as a roadblock to progress, "the *Bete Noire* of the South, a millstone about her neck."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "Brann to Bob. The Apostle Writes the Pagan," *Iconoclast*, vol. 5, no. 1 (February 1895), 15.

⁵⁶ Thomas Dixon, Jr., "Progress," in *Living Problems in Religion and Social Science* (New York: Dillingham, 1889), 129-43.

⁵⁷ Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast*, 43-4.

As a highly political theologian, Dixon's extensive exchanges with Robert Ingersoll showed that he was keenly attuned to the necessity to adapt and innovate.⁵⁸ He was also profoundly influenced by the rise of plebian politics. He took part in the 1891 national Populist convention in Cincinnati, and admired the Populists as much as many Populists admired him. By 1895, Dixon's heterodoxy had taken him outside the Baptist church to found a "People's Temple" committed to social justice and human solidarity.⁵⁹ Many Texans sympathized with a similar liberal or humanist faith. Such ideas were widespread among the large number of unaffiliated Christians. They also took organized form in the liberal or progressive wing of the Disciples of Christ and other "Campbellite" or "restorationist" churches seeking to reclaim Christianity on the moral foundation of doing good.

The African-American churches, however, made up by far the largest evangelical contingent seeking a more liberal policy. Mostly farmers, tenants, and farm laborers only one or two generations removed from slavery, black Texans faced intense poverty and political repression under the "redeemed" regime of

⁵⁸ In 1892, Dixon published a book with 200 pages of his sermons treating the views of Ingersoll. Commenting on Dixon's book, Eugene Debs observed at the time: "I introduce the testimony of Rev. Thomas Dixon, of New York, who declares that Mr. Ingersoll 'has done much to rid the world of the superstitions, lies, shams, humbugs, traditions, and pretenses that used to pass current as orthodox truth.' Such is the admission of an orthodox clergyman, who has published a book... to arrest the conquering mission of Mr. Ingersoll." Thomas Dixon, Jr., *Dixon on Ingersoll* (New York: Alden, 1892); Eugene V. Debs, "Robert Ingersoll," *American Journal of Politics* (February 1893), 198-203. And it was not just Dixon, as reform-minded theologians from David Swing to Henry Ward Beecher felt compelled to engage the "mistakes of Ingersoll," J. B. McClure, editor, *Mistakes of Ingersoll and His Answers Complete* (Chicago: Rhodes & McClure, 1884).

⁵⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Thomas Dixon: American Proteus," in *Thomas Dixon Jr. and the Birth of Modern America*, ed. Michele K. Gillespie and Randal L. Hall (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2006), 23-45; *Caucasian*, May 21, 28, June 4, 11, 18, 1891, February 11, 18, March 3, April 14, 21, 1892; Mary Elizabeth Lease, "Mrs. Mary E. Lease," unpublished, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, 1912.

white supremacy. The rural black churches had meager resources, yet they increasingly played a role in neighborhood social and political networks. The majority of these networks were associated with the Baptists. The black Baptist churches received aid from the New York Home Mission Society, and the paternalist tutelage of the white clergy in Waco. But African Americans joined Baptist churches because they enjoyed relative autonomy from church authorities, which meant that church members worshipped in the ways they wanted, and made use of their churches for the social, educational, and political functions they needed. The white Baptist leadership feared this autonomy.⁶⁰ The black Baptist leadership, however, strove to adapt, recognizing that the fate of the churches rested on their ability to address the acute social problems of their impoverished rural membership.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the African-American pastor Lee Lewis Campbell was responsible for much of the missionary work among black Texans. Born in Milam County, Campbell gained an education and attended the University of Chicago. From his ministry in Austin, he would become president of the General Baptist State Convention, and moderator of the St. John's Association that claimed 230,000 members in the state, and that held annual camp meetings five to ten thousand strong. Regarding the politics of race, Campbell preached accommodation. "The races in the South are getting along smoothly," he noted, "and where the negro accepts the advice of his white neighbor prosperity is in evidence."⁶¹ But on matters of religion, Campbell advocated innovation. He argued if religion were to address

⁶⁰ Lawrence D. Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1971), 232, 171-75.

⁶¹ "Encampment of Negroes," "Negro Leader Invites Study Race Problem," "Death Claims Dr. L. L. Campbell," Negro Scrapbooks, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

the needs of the people, it needed to be aligned with the latest in human thought, taking into account Darwin and Agassiz, Emerson and Lowell. Reflecting his interest in comparative religion, he described the 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago as “like an awakening.” Most significantly, Campbell emphasized “social service” over “saving souls.” He edited the *Sunday School Herald* that covered a broad range of social and political topics, including the pros and cons of the emerging People’s Party for the black farmer. Given that the church’s following was overwhelmingly composed of black farmers and farm laborers facing cruel poverty and hardships, for the church to survive politically it had to “save men’s bodies and brighten and enrich their lives.”⁶² Perhaps Campbell, much like Martin Luther King, Jr. half a century later, had learned elements of the Social Gospel from his northern education. At the same time, the Social Gospel emerging from northern universities and seminaries resembled in its essentials the religious adaptations and innovations undertaken by a broad section of rural Texans, black and white, seeking to improve the here and now.

Across Texas, rural folk and townspeople, the churched and unchurched, engaged at multiple levels in the religious controversies. As a keen journalist, William Cowper Brann understood the popular sentiments running against the entrenched Baptist leadership. To the extent that the *Iconoclast* featured exposes of Baptist scandal and intrigue, it served a readership deeply resentful of “plutocratic preachers.” Brann’s most sensational editorials involved the pregnancy of a teenage Brazilian girl who had been in the care of a Baylor official and, according to

⁶² *Sunday School Herald* (Austin, TX), May 21, June 4, June 25, July 30, 1892.

testimony of the girl, the embrace of the official's brother. In the eyes of the Baylor community, Brann's sarcastic harping on the case had crossed the line of tolerance.

On October 2, 1897, an angry mob of Baylor students abducted Brann with plans to tar and feather the "atheist," and when those plans fell through they decided to hang him from a tree on the edge of campus. The timely intervention of two Baylor professors prevented a lynching. Before his wounds healed, Brann was again abducted and horse whipped by two Baylor stalwarts. In response to the assaults on his friend, Judge Gerald submitted a protest note to a Waco newspaper that led to the assassination attempt on the Judge. Four months later, Brann himself was murdered, silencing the *Iconoclast*, and closing an epoch of intense religious conflict.⁶³

In the very same rural districts that had witnessed a generation of religious strife, Texas farmers also unleashed a political revolt against corporate power. They launched the Farmers' Alliance, which provided the organizational and ideological impetus for the national Populist movement. The connections between these two developments are not immediately transparent. The Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Party maintained a ban on discussion of religious matters within their organizations. Religious organizations, such as Shaw's association of free thinkers, tended to avoid discussion of politics. The same was true of Brann's *Iconoclast*, although it commented favorably on the Populists and their reforms, and expressed

⁶³ Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast*, 142-80.

solidarity when Populist newspapers faced church boycotts much as the *Iconoclast* did.⁶⁴ Yet, abundant evidence points to a connection.

County by county mapping suggests a correspondence between the presence of members of liberal or heterodox religious societies and Populist voting.⁶⁵ Other evidence helps to fill in the map. For example, enthusiasts for the rationalist philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg had a special place in the Texas Populist leadership. This included Thomas King who served as a judge and led the third party movement in Erath County, and his friend Albert Francisco, who was both a rural Populist and a rural missionary for the Swedenborgian New Church. Thomas Nugent, the People's Party candidate for governor, was perhaps the most respected of all Texas Populists. Although sympathetic to Swedenborg's philosophy, Nugent waged his own struggle against what he considered the tyranny and "thumb screw" methods of the Protestant religion, and pursued a humanist philosophy outside of church or creed.⁶⁶

The *Southern Mercury*, the newspaper of the Texas Farmers' Alliance, mainly avoided religious questions, but a careful reader would pick up its liberal messages and protests against ostracism of the religiously heterodox. This included a defense of the Spiritualists, a considerable number of whom were also Texas Populists. "Certain religious fanatics" that sought to persecute the Spiritualists, the *Southern Mercury* noted, "forget that it was the persecutions of the handful of early Christians

⁶⁴ *Iconoclast*, vol. 5, no. 8 (September 1895), 141-2, vol.5, no. 9 (October 1895), 155, vol. 5, no. 11 (December 1895), 216.

⁶⁵ King, "Religious Dimensions of the Agrarian Protest," 112.

⁶⁶ Catherine Nugent, ed., *Life Work of Thomas L. Nugent* (Stephenville, Tex.: C. Nugent, 1896), 161.

which gave such an impetus” to their religion.⁶⁷ Eben LaFayette Dohoney, the People’s Party candidate for state chief justice was the Populists most famous Spiritualist in Texas. It is more difficult to measure the connections between Spiritualism and Populism at the local level. But we know, for example, that a hundred percent of all listed members of Spiritualist organizations in Texas lived in Populist strongholds. That included the backwoods of Grimes County, where the local Spiritualist organization had twenty-nine members.⁶⁸ That may or may not have included John W. H. Davis, a poor cotton farmer who ran in 1894 as the People’s Party candidate for county tax collector. What we do know is that Davis, came to question a Christianity that ignored the here and now with its misplaced focus on “your dead carcass after death,” and that by the Populist decade he studied metaphysical literature that rejected the perceived fallacies of religion and belief in a god, in favor of “mental science” in “the light of a more scientific day.”⁶⁹

As for the presence of agnosticism or free thought in the ranks of the Texas Populists, that is perhaps the most difficult to measure, as the charge of “atheism” carried a political price. Nonetheless, here, too, we can find revealing connections. J. N. Colwick and T. Theo Colwick, the president and secretary of the Norse Farmers Alliance, for example, were also supporters of James Shaw and free thought.⁷⁰ And associations of free thinkers took part in Populist politics in less direct ways. In September 1896, the Populists turned the Labor Day Parade in Dallas into a People’s

⁶⁷ *Southern Mercury*, July 12, 1888.

⁶⁸ King, “Religious Dimensions,” 166-69.

⁶⁹ “Notes of J. W. H. Davis,” John B. Rushing Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁷⁰ *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 1891), 9.

Party march. Tom Watson, the well-known “agrarian rebel” and Populist leader from Georgia led the parade. Right behind Watson marched the contingent of the Dallas Freethinkers’ Association.⁷¹ Presumably, while organizers had not welcomed contingents of the religious, agnostics were a special case precisely because of their irreligion. As for Tom Watson, it is unclear whether or not he had ties to the Dallas agnostics. Watson himself showed no particular interest in religion, with the possible exception of his worship of Napoleon. However, one of Watson’s closest comrades in Georgia, the editor of his *People’s Party Paper* and state leader of the Populist Party, was Charles C. Post, who was regularly branded an “atheist” by his political enemies. In fact, Post and his wife were advocates of “mental science,” and contributed articles to the metaphysical literature studied by the Grimes County Populist organizer J. W. H. Davis.⁷²

The high profile of Nugent, King, Francisco, Dohoney, and other religious iconoclasts earned the Texas Populists regular attacks from their Democratic Party opponents as the party of “infidels” and “cranks.”⁷³ At the same time, it was well known that former evangelical preachers had a prominent place in the ranks of Populist lecturers and organizers. In rural Texas, the ministry was one of the few professions available to educated young men, and it was not unusual for farmers to also serve as itinerant preachers. A reporter from the *Galveston Daily News* queried: “How many preachers are there in the populist party. Who knows?” The reporter

⁷¹ *Daily Times Herald* (Dallas), September 7, 1896; *Dallas Morning News*, September 6, 1896.

⁷² “Mental Science,” *Freedom: A Journal of Realistic Idealism* (December 1, 1896), in “Notes of J. W. H. Davis,” John B. Rushing Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁷³ Roscoe C. Martin, *The People’s Party in Texas: A Study of Third Party Politics* (Austin: University of Texas, 1933), 82-88.

then added that, "It is a popular belief that more than two-thirds of the populist orators have at some time or other been connected to the ministry." This included two secretaries of the state Farmers' Alliance, the Methodist circuit rider Harrison "Stump" Ashby and the Baptist parson S. O. Daws. When asked why he quit the church, Ashby explained that he could do more for the human race working for the Populist Party, "preaching the gospel of universal emancipation," and "trying to liberate the minds and bodies of men."⁷⁴

Similarly, the African-American Populist John B. Rayner left the Baptist ministry to become the most renowned Populist stump speaker in the cotton districts of eastern Texas. Ordination as a preacher had allowed Rayner to supplement his earnings as a schoolteacher. But he bridled at Protestant dogmas and what he decried as "emotionalism in the pews." Rejecting "emotional religion" and the church, Rayner adopted what he understood as the true religion of service for the good of the people.⁷⁵ From that perspective, the presence of former preachers in the Populist ranks did not indicate the hold of traditional religion on the movement as much as it corresponded to E. P. Thompson's observation regarding the rise of plebian politics as a challenge to the evangelical cause.

Rural women's claims to equal rights represented a powerful force within this plebian politics. Populist women had their own reasons to resent male dominated churches. Within the Farmers' Alliance women comprised more than a

⁷⁴ "Populist Preachers," *Galveston Daily News*, September 28, 1894.

⁷⁵ John B. Rayner, "Good Citizenship and the Negro," undated ms., "Some of J. B. Rayner's Wise Sayings," undated ms., and "Racial Growth," undated letter to the *Dallas Morning News*, John B. Rayner Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

quarter of the membership, where they enjoyed at least nominal equality with men, and widely discussed and debated the problems of women's rights. This included sharp critiques of the churches and the denominational warfare that led the individual farmer to "his special church for the purpose of hearing his own peculiar doctrines," resulting in the further social isolation of rural women.⁷⁶ Populist women also resented the haughty and superior attitudes that church members expressed towards the rural folk. Susan Luscombe of the Farmers' Alliance criticized those who "profess to be Christians, but they do not inhabit this world to help lift up the fallen," adding, "if there is anything we hate with a most cordial hatred it is a 'holier than thou' spirit."⁷⁷

Bettie Gay, who managed a cotton plantation near Columbus, Texas, was perhaps unique among the leaders of Texas Populism in that she maintained her standing in the Baptist church. But her relations with the church cooled dramatically as her Populist activism grew. She expressed discontent with church policies that "discourage intellectual effort" among women and silenced their opinions.⁷⁸ As farmwomen gained their voice within the Farmers' Alliance, they subjected the churches to criticism for denying their equal rights. As one female member of the Farmers' Alliance asked, "If politics are corrupt, what is the matter with our churches that our great Methodist conference refused to seat the lady delegates sent? Is it, too, too corrupt for women?" The answer to this question,

⁷⁶ "Woman in the Alliance," W. L. Garvin and S. O. Daws, eds., *History of the National Farmers' Alliance and Co-Operative Union of America* (Jacksboro, TX: J. N. Rogers & Co., 1887).

⁷⁷ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), November 13, 1888.

⁷⁸ Bettie Gay, "The Influence of Women in the Alliance," N. A. Dunning, ed., *The Farmers' Alliance History and Agricultural Digest* (Washington, D. C.: Alliance, 1891), 308-12.

she went on to explain, lay in the efforts of men to keep women in their economic place. "When church debts are to be paid or ministers' salaries to be raised, then the ministers think there is no harm in woman's counsel and woman's energetic work but when it comes to admitting women delegates they fear this may prove a stepping stone to the pulpit and thus the salaries of men."⁷⁹

Not all Protestant churches in Texas proved as unaccommodating or even hostile to Populism as the mainstream Methodists and Baptists did. Sam Johnson, the fraternal grandfather of the thirty-sixth President, left the Baptists for the Christadelphians, who had no ordained ministry, did not believe in a devil, and rejected the emphasis on personal immorality. This proved congenial for Johnson, who drank too much and loudly engaged in Populist politics, including an unsuccessful run in 1892 for the state legislature on the People's Party ticket.⁸⁰ The liberal or progressive wing of the Disciples of Christ also had a more accepting attitude towards Populist activism. The Campbellite preacher J. W. Biard of Paris, Texas, a member of the People's Party National Committee, had originally joined the Farmers' Alliance to "serve his people better." When he was not lecturing for Populist reforms he continued to preach part time. He maintained a friendly correspondence with a C. C. Perrin, a faculty member at the Disciples of Christ's Add-Ran College in nearby Hood County, in which they probed the meaning of

⁷⁹ *Southern Mercury* (Dallas), June 6, 1888.

⁸⁰ Caro, *Path to Power*, 27-33; M. Phelan, *Handbook of All Denominations*, (Nashville & Dallas: M. E. Church, 1916), 38.

Agassiz and Darwin and the proposition, "It does not dishonor God to think he works through the laws of nature in all possible ways."⁸¹

Indeed, religious-minded Populists tended to embrace a broad, adaptive social Christianity. Writing on the role of religion within the Farmers' Alliance, the Reverend Isom P. Langley noted the straining of the ties between the farmers and the religious leadership, as "men and women have become more exacting as to the conduct of the leaders in both Church and State." The people demanded science-based policies, according to Langley, because "science is what we know." If the Christian evangelicals were to succeed in the conquest of rural Texas, Langley proposed, "let our pastors and priests study the physical needs of the people more, and give them less theology." "One of the main reasons why we have so many empty seats in our churches," Langley explained, "is the abundance of empty stomachs and unclad limbs." Such was the rationalist social Christianity of religiously minded Texas Populists.⁸²

⁸¹ "Populist Preachers," *Galveston Daily News*, September 28, 1894; C. C. Perrin, Thorp Spring, Texas, to W. (Bustah) Biard, Biardstown, Texas, February 24, 1886, Biard (James W.) Papers 1882-1913, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

Although the Disciples of Christ may have been more tolerant towards Populist politics, they kept their distance as distinct movement. For example, a red River cotton farmer recorded in his diary that on Tuesday, August 9, 1892, the "biggest mob that ever met at our Court House" gathered to hear a debate between Populist and Democratic speakers, with the farmer strongly disapproving of the former. Four days later, he reported approvingly "the Campellites commenced a big meeting on Saturday night," that had no apparent connection to the political events. W. M. Bower (Diary), Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

The Disciples of Christ moved Add-Ran College from Thorp Spring (Hood County) to Waco in 1895 where it was renamed Texas Christian University before relocating to Forth Worth. I am indebted to Professor Gregg Cantrell of TCU for bringing to my attention the role that the Disciples of Christ played within Texas Populism. (Cantrell is presently writing a history of Texas Populism for Yale University Press.)

⁸² Rev. Isom P. Langley, "Religion in the Alliance," Dunning, *Farmers' Alliance History*, 313-17.

The size and significance of this religious element within Populism is difficult to measure. Robert McMath, Jr., argues that it was large and highly significant. He draws a parallel between Populism as the revitalization of a radical evangelical tradition and the Christian base communities of Latin American “Liberation Theology.” He also draws a parallel with the black church in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.⁸³ Unlike either Latin American base communities or church-based civil rights mobilizations, however, the white farmers of the Populist movement did not organize through the churches. Elsewhere in the country, urban Populists made a few isolated and unsuccessful attempts to set up “People’s Churches” or “People’s Temples” with a Populist orientation.⁸⁴ No such effort was made in rural Texas, where white Populists met in public school houses or other public buildings, and issued their demands from courthouse steps. Good political reasons led the Populists to meet on such secular terrain. A central focus of Populist politics was the expansion of the public sphere in the realms of education, commerce, transportation, telecommunications, and finance. And it only made sense to leverage public space to achieve such public aims.

But there were also good religious reasons why the Populists did not work through the churches. The first of these was the rural context in which only a fraction of Texas farmers were connected to an organized church. Moreover, within the framework of the religious warfare of the 1880s and 1890s, those farmers who

⁸³ Robert C. McMath, Jr., “Populist Base Communities: The Evangelical Roots of Farm Protest in Texas,” *Locus* 1 (1988), 53-63.

⁸⁴ *Nonconformist* (Indianapolis), January 26, 1893.

supported Populism also tended to favor what they perceived to be the liberal side of the religious conflict. They tended to seek spiritual reforms to align their cosmology with what they perceived as scientific and modern realities, and which would also reinforce moral certainties about human improvement and the ability of reformers to effect social progress. Significantly, the liberal, humanist, and scientific side of the spectrum of belief and unbelief also tended towards atomization and weakened commitment to religious organization. In short, the heterodox admixture of faiths within Populist ranks pointed away from the churches and towards secular space.

African American farmers, meanwhile, confronted different political contingencies. In post-Reconstruction Texas, it was often either dangerous or impossible for black citizens to organize openly in public or to issue economic and political demands on the courthouse steps. Blacks usually lacked access to a schoolhouse worthy of the name; schools for black children were often woefully inadequate farm structures, and what schools there were often doubled as churches. The Colored Farmers' Alliance emerged in Texas during the 1880s parallel to the white Farmers' Alliance and with similar stated goals. But in the face of political repression, the church represented the safest option for blacks to take part in rural associational life. Indeed, one of the reasons why the white Farmers' Alliance reluctantly accepted the existence of the Colored Farmers' Alliance was assurance that it would stay out of the public sphere and remain under the roof of the churches

and the watchful eyes of the white preachers who supervised the Colored Alliance.⁸⁵

The broad extension of the neighborhood networks that made up the rural black churches indicates that in Texas African American farmers had perhaps a stronger commitment to organized religion than their white counterparts did. But did unlike political circumstances mainly account for this apparently religious difference? Possibly so, but more tellingly, the variations belief adopted by the Baptist Rev. Lee Lewis Campbell and by the iconoclastic Populist orator John Rayner suggest that both blacks and whites shared a rural environment subject to the same religious storms.

It needs to be stressed that, although Populist farmers tended to align on one end of the spectrum of belief, rural Texans more generally included a fare share of people who considered themselves to be orthodox and conservative evangelicals. But that does not mean that they were in some qualitative way more conservative than their more urban counterparts. Towns tended to be strongholds of the Baptist and Methodist churches. Baylor University meant that Waco served as the institutional headquarters of the orthodox Baptists in the state. But Waco was also a town with extensive interactions with the surrounding rural environment.

Another way to examine the rural/urban divide would be to take into account that Texas lay under the urban shadows of big cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. And just as rural Texans felt the liberal and heterodox influences of the likes of Robert Ingersoll or Thomas Dixon, Jr., they were also subject to the missionary efforts of Dwight Moody's Chicago based conservative

⁸⁵ Richard Manning Humphrey, "The History of the Colored Farmers' National Alliance," Dunning, *Farmers' Alliance History*, 288-92.

crusades. Baptist missionary work in Texas languished until reinforcements arrived from the Home Mission Society in New York. From his corporate offices in Manhattan, John D. Rockefeller sent big checks to aid his embattled Baptist brethren at Baylor. Rockefeller's contributions were made in strict secrecy as it was apparently viewed as important to hide the role of Yankee dollars in the building up of the Texas church.⁸⁶ The power and influence in Texas of Rockefeller, Moody, and the New York and Chicago based missions suggests a gap in the standard teleological narrative of the liberalizing or secularizing urban North leaving behind a rural South clinging to its Bibles and traditions.

The realignments and shifts in religious and political context from one generation to the next reveal even larger gaps in the standard narrative. The politics of teaching evolution is instructive in this regard. In the 1880s and 90s, the Texas Farmers' Alliance, constituted a formidable political and intellectual force. The Alliance movement formed the base of public support for the improvement of the common schools, emphasizing science-based education as the key to the farmers' progress. At the same time, evolutionary theory was a staple of the Alliance movement's own educational projects. The Farmers' Alliance press urged its readers that "No farmhouse in America" should be without Edward Clodd's book *The Story of Creation: A Plain Account of Evolution*, explaining the ideas of Darwin, Huxley, and

⁸⁶ B. F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Texas* (Dallas, 1906), 265; For example, Rockefeller sent fifteen thousand dollars to Baylor University in June of 1892. Apparently, the dealings between Rockefeller and Baylor were made "in strict confidence," as being bankrolled by the Standard Oil tycoon involved political complications. J. D. Rockefeller and F. T. Gates to B. H. Carroll, June 23, 1892. B. H. Carroll Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Spencer.⁸⁷ In that scientific historical moment, evolutionary theory was militantly wielded as a tool of surging agrarian and labor politics. Legislative action to bar the teaching of evolution in the schools was nowhere on the horizon. Even the Baptists in Waco and other more orthodox evangelicals sought to avoid direct clashes over evolution and science, and mainly tacked before the prevailing winds.

The 1898 murder of William Cowper Brann and the silencing of the *Iconoclast* was a telltale sign of a shifting climate. Two years before, Texas Populism had received a stunning blow with developments in national electoral politics. The endorsement of the Democratic William Jennings Bryan by the national convention of the People's Party rendered Texas Populism into sharply warring factions that succumbed to even further demoralization with Bryan's defeat in the general election. In the new century, some of the former Populists took part in new farmer associations or followed Eugene Debs into Socialism, but much of the energy of the earlier agrarian revolt had dissipated. Many former Populists rebuilt broken connections they had severed during the high tide of protest, reconciling with the Democratic Party establishment, and some also with the church establishment. Meanwhile, the sensational techniques of modern mass evangelicalism that had been introduced by such evangelical entrepreneurs as Sam Jones, often to the shock and dismay of the Waco clergy, made steady headway.⁸⁸ Rising with the

⁸⁷ *National Economist*, March 14, 1889, August 3, 1889; Edward Clodd, *The Story of Creation: A Plain Account of Evolution* (London: Longman's Green, 1888).

⁸⁸ Dwight Moody of Chicago perfected the modern techniques of celebrity evangelism by way of mass publicity. Sam Jones of Georgia carried these techniques into central Texas. Although his folksy and theatrical sermons ridiculed the Baptist old guard, Jones preached a politically and religiously conservative message. "It makes to his pecuniary interest to abuse the Pops... with his oratorical stinkpots," as Brann explained the politics of "Slangy Sam"

conservative political tide of the 1920s, a new and militant Protestant “fundamentalism” emerged as a powerful force in Texas politics. In the fall of 1925, Texas’s first female Governor Miriam Ferguson ordered the state’s textbook commission to prohibit mention of evolution in high school textbooks, an order that would have been inconceivable a generation previous.

In purging the textbooks, Governor Ferguson took inspiration from William Jennings Bryan’s performance at the Scopes Trial and Bryan’s martyr-like collapse and death five days after the trial ended. The trial climaxed with Darrow questioning Bryan as an expert witness on the Bible: What of Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster? How did the physics work in the Biblical story of the sun standing still? Journalists at the time, and historical textbooks since, have described Darrow’s merciless questioning as the city slicker abusing the country rube, the modern secularist bullying the defender of the old faith. But looking ahead from the perspective of the late nineteenth century Darrow’s questioning takes on a whole different meaning. A clue to the difference is that in the 1890s, it was Darrow, not Bryan, who was the Populist stump speaker, rallying Illinois farmers to the People’s Party.⁸⁹ Darrow and Bryan had much in common: roots in small town evangelical environments; Chicago educations; comradeship in reform politics; and close at

and the “modern preacher.” “The Preacher in Politics,” *Iconoclast*, vol. 5, no. 8 (September 1895), 141-42; “The Black Moody of Texas,” and “Rev. Collier, the Sam Jones of Texas,” *Sunday School Herald* (Austin), July 2, 1892; “Religious Revolution,” *Waco Daily Examiner*, June 21, 25, and 26, 1885; *Independent Pulpit*, vol. 3, no. 5 (July 1885), 54, vol. 3, no. 7 (September 1885), 75; Bruce J. Evensen, *God’s Man for the Gilded Age: D. L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

⁸⁹ *Chicago Searchlight*, July 19, August 9, 16, 1894; Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901* (New London: Connecticut College, 1946, reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966), 181, 194, 197.

hand experience with the religious controversies of the 1880s and 90s. Darrow followed Robert Ingersoll to free thought. Bryan exchanged letters with Ingersoll in a crisis of faith, but decided to stay with the Presbyterians, a denomination wracked with conflict including the famous 1892 heresy trial of the liberal theologian Charles Briggs. Bryan never showed much interest in the religious controversies, but later twentieth century shocks, including the modern horrors of imperialist war in the Philippines, the Northwest Pacific, and later WWI, turned Bryan into a critic of evolutionary theory and a supporter of anti-evolution laws.

Significantly, in his line of questioning at the Scopes Trial, including verbatim phrasing about the physics of the sun standing still, Darrow plagiarized from a work of Robert Ingersoll's titled "Professor Briggs." The context, however, was reversed. A national hero to religious liberals, including those within the agrarian movement,⁹⁰ Ingersoll questioned Briggs only to encourage his critical outlook.⁹¹ By contrast, Darrow's questioning of Bryan aimed at exposing his former comrade for betraying the critical outlook that Briggs and like-minded evangelicals had once embraced. Hence the heat of Darrow's grilling at the Scopes Trial. The aim was not to ridicule rural or nineteenth-century backwardness, but twentieth-century apostasy. Bryan's efforts on behalf of evangelical fundamentalism threatened to close the door on what Darrow and Bryan had experienced as the rationalist and humanistic possibilities in the reform campaigns of their youth.

⁹⁰ *Caucasian* (Clinton, NC), May 21, 28, 1891.

⁹¹ Robert G. Ingersoll, "Professor Briggs," *Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*, vol. 12, (New York: Dresden, 1909), 301-13.

By the time Governor Ferguson ordered writing evolution out of the textbooks, the Texas economy had shifted into high gear of technological modernization. The black gold of petroleum outstripped the white gold of cotton. Texas farmers drove Fords and Chevys, and the lucky ones had electricity and a radio. Most of them forgot or never heard of James Shaw, William Cowpers Brann, and the religious wars that had convulsed the Lone Star state during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Yet, those wars had provided essential context for the agrarian revolt of the 1880s and 90s. The Populist movement took on the features of a *high modernism*, embracing a “muscle bound” belief in science, state power, and progress, precisely because it emerged in an intellectual environment when scientific rationalism had unprecedented moral authority in such places as the cotton districts of central and eastern Texas. That this authority would wane in future generations underscores the weaknesses in teleological narratives about agrarian traditionalism and urban modernity. It also points to the role of political and social contingency in the shifting configurations of belief and unbelief.

In other words, to understand why at the outset of the twenty first century the evangelical churches exert such effective power in central Texas, referencing rural tradition only explains so much, and political developments explain much more. In the wake of the civil rights revolution, for example, the profusion of racially separate Christian academies has given the churches a new and extraordinary educational and institutional role. Similarly, the rising power of the evangelical entrepreneur corresponds to the political transition from the public and secular ideals of the Great Society to the triumphant market fundamentalism of the early

twenty first century. From that perspective, it is either coincidence or an act of divine intervention that Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush both have close ties to the central Texas farm country at the center of the agrarian revolt of the 1880s and 90s. Johnson's father, the son of a Populist politician, was "broad-minded" on religious questions and despite ostracism from the "church-going people," would sit by the fire with an infidel neighbor and talk all night "about Darwin and other things."⁹² He also hated cotton farming, taught in a one-room schoolhouse in the old Populist stronghold of Gillespie County, went into politics, and shaped the worldview of the future president. The ambitions of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society would come closer to *high modernism* than those of any president before or since. Almost forty years later, George W. Bush, scion of the East Coast financial and political elite, product of Yale and Harvard, made Crawford, Texas, twenty miles outside of Waco, the site of the "Western White House." That is where he found a congenial environment for his twin beliefs in evangelical orthodoxy and the magic of private markets. Such is Clio's caprice.

⁹² Caro, *Path to Power*, 63.