

The liberal fundamentalist

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One hundred years ago this summer, a fundamentalist Christian stood before the convention of a major political party and offered an impromptu resolution. He ended his impassioned speech by quoting [words of Jesus](#). The speech was not what you might expect.

William Jennings Bryan called on Democrats in 1912 to declare, “as proof of [their] fidelity to the people,” their opposition “to the nomination of any candidate for president who is a representative of J. [Pierpoint Morgan](#) . . . or any other member of the privilege-hunting and favor-seeking class. . . ‘If thy right hand has offended thee, cut it off.’ The party needs to cut off those corrupting influences to save itself.”

The speech was part of a calculated gamble: Bryan wanted to force delegates to go on record as opposed to the vested interests of eastern banks. The gambit worked. As Bryan hoped, the move spurred the convention to nominate for president the progressive Woodrow Wilson.

As president, Wilson would adopt laws that restricted business monopolies, protected unions, regulated banks, enacted a graduated income tax and restricted child labor. These were among the many progressive causes that Bryan had fought for all his life, always buttressing his arguments with allusions to Christian convictions and the demands of Christian charity.

I found the account of the 1912 Democratic convention in Michael Kazin's biography of Bryan, [A Godly Hero](#). Kazin shows how throughout his life Bryan joined traditional Protestant piety to an attack on banks and corporations whose unfair practices threatened the welfare of ordinary Americans. Bryan was beloved by western farmers and hated by New York industrialists. By contemporary standards, he was a religious conservative and a political radical.

Even Bryan's defense of a literal reading of Genesis at the [Scopes Trial](#) of 1925—the event for which he is most remembered, thanks largely to the popular (and historically misleading) 1950s play [Inherit the Wind](#)—was rooted in his political sympathies. Bryan worried (with good reason) that acceptance of Darwin would serve to justify the power of the strong to dominate the weak.

To read Kazin's account of Bryan's career is to be reminded again and again of roads not taken in American political and religious life and to wonder: What would have happened if conservative Christian piety had remained yoked to Bryan's brand of the social gospel?