

**Matthew H. Wahlert**  
**NEH 2010 Seminar**  
**Religion in the Populist Movement**

**Teaching Situation**

I currently teach AP US History, AP US Government, and the Politics of the Middle East at a Catholic suburban high school in Northern Kentucky. The school population is upper middle class with little racial, ethnic, or class diversity. My purpose for taking the NEH Seminar “The Many and The One” was to supplement the curriculum of my US History classes. Hence, my discussion will be limited to applications central to that course of study.

One of the most difficult of all tasks for an Advanced Placement teacher of any discipline is to balance the depth and breadth of the course. Ultimately, an AP teacher is responsible for a great deal of content at the end of the year but that teacher also must balance the importance of stressing the complexity of history through different perspectives.

**Historical Background of Issue**

As the last decade of the nineteenth century commenced, the unfolding American narrative was one of frustration and angst. Political unrest especially emerged in the farming communities of the South and Midwest. By 1890, many farmers joined in Alliances in order to achieve economic and political goals through collective action. Alliances welcomed both men and women; Colored Alliances represented black Americans. A total estimated at 2.5 million farmers claimed membership to various Alliances. As part of the movement, Alliances printed approximately 1000 different newspapers and hired 40,000 speakers to spread the word of the Alliance movement. In the South, the election of 4 pro-Alliance governors, 7 legislatures, and 44 Congressmen illustrated the growing power of the movement.

Alliances chose Cincinnati, Ohio as the site of an 1891 convention called in order to work to combine the many Alliances into a larger unitary movement. Conventioneers formed the People’s Party – the Populists – in response to a need for more centralization within the movement. Successes of the newly organized Populist Party quickly followed the convention. Kansas elected a Populist governor in 1892 and the party followed with another convention that year in Omaha. The 1892 Populist meeting resulted in the inclusion of a pro-worker platform and the introduction of James B. Weaver as the 1892 Populist candidate for president of the United States. Weaver would carry the states of Colorado, Kansas, Nevada, and Idaho while tallying 37% in the Democratic stronghold of Alabama. Weaver tallied approximately one million votes as the Populist candidate. The 1892 elections brought the victory of 1500 Populist candidates for state and local offices.

In the midst of the Populist rebellion, the United States found itself propelled into the Depression of 1893. Although not studied to the extent of the Great Depression of some forty years later, the 1893 economy was nearly as bad. Historians estimate that approximately 20% of all Americans were unemployed – and that remained the average for four years. In 1894, America would hear from the wage earning side of the Populist party. Jacob Coxey led some 400 men on a march on Washington that began in central Ohio. Coxey’s Army marched in the hopes of convincing President Grover Cleveland to create works projects in order to address chronic unemployment. The landscape of America, by 1894, was littered with hundreds of thousands of “tramps” who moved from place to place simply in search of day work.

One historical perspective is that the Populist worldview was one clearly fashioned by their religious background. Many of the meetings were held in evangelical Protestant churches and began with prayers in hymns. One delegate at the Omaha convention recalled it was akin to “a religious revival, a crusade, a Pentecost of politics in which a tongue of flame sat upon every man, and each spoke as the spirit gave him utterance.” Another Populist, Reverend Thomas Dixon characterized the farm revolt as “the result of divine inspiration.” Religious interpretations of the Populist movement suggest that God sided with those in the movement in order to save both Christianity and the institutions of republican government. Milford W. Howard, a Populist member of Congress from Alabama, spoke of a struggle for control in the United States that positioned the people against the plutocrats in his 1894 book “If Christ Came to Congress.” Ultimately, Howard warned the struggle may result in an epic revolution.

It is the effort of this project to view Populism through the perspective of religion. Ultimately, what follows is not universal and meant to be the last word. Instead, it is my hope a more directed study of the link between religion and the Populist Movement offers students an starting point.

### **Famous Populist Figures – Brief List Useful for Further Study**

Thomas E. Watson  
Mary Ellen Lease  
Jeremiah Simpson  
James B. Weaver  
Jacob Coxey  
Reverend Thomas Dixon  
Pitchfork Ben Tillman  
Marion Butler  
Rueben Kolb  
Milford W. Howard

**Unit Study – AP Us History**  
**“Postmillennialism and the Populist Farm Revolt of the 1890s”**

**I Introductory remarks – Explanation versus Description**

**II The Stauffer Model (use method similar to Professor Stauffer of Harvard University – link primary sources with theory)**

**III Populism**

A- What was Populism (Description)

One description (enotes.com) – “Populism is an American movement that started in 1891 with the founding of the Populist Party, which worked to improve conditions for farmers and laborers”

Emerged from Alliance movement in 1891 at Cincinnati Convention  
1892 – 1500 Populist candidates won state and local offices; 8.5% of votes at presidential level

See – Ignatius Donnelly (MN), Tom Watson (GA), Frances Willard (WCTU), Jacob Coxey (OH), “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman (SC), Marion Butler (NC), Rubeen Kolb (ALA), Milford Howard (ALA), Mary Lease (KS), James Weaver (IA), Lorenzo Lewelling (KS), “Sockless” Jerry Simpson (KS)

B- How have historians viewed Populism (Explanation)

Garden variety explanations typically consider PES variables (political, economic, social)

- Richard Hofstadter (1955) – “The Age of Reform from Bryan to FDR”  
Obsolete view of farmers and role in society
- Norman Pollack (1962) – “The Populist Response to Industrial America”  
View of reform was radical (maybe even “fringe”)
- Michael Kazin (1994) – “Populist Persuasion” - Just part of the culture  
– Huey Long, George Wallace, Ross Perot
- Typically, most explanations do not account for religion<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to review of literature found in Randall Stephens, “The Convergence of Populism, Religion, and the Holiness-Pentecostal Movements,” *Fides et Historia*, 32, Number 1, 2000, 51-64. A similar argument is developed in the literature review by Walter T.K. Nugent, “Some Parameters of Populism,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct. 1966), 255-270.

## IV Application of Stauffer typology to Populist Revolt

A- Outlined by Rhys Williams and Susan Alexander<sup>2</sup>

Postmillennial

Humans called to reform world and institutions

Development of Plutocracy, inequality, and political privilege viewed as a violation of God's order.

Poverty not a result of moral failings but linked to institutions created by humans

Need for government to intervene in society in order to establish a more just social order

B- Primary Sources Documents

- a. **William Jennings Bryan** – Democrat/Populist Presidential Candidate (1896)

Every economic question a moral question

“Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold”<sup>3</sup>

- b. **James B. Weaver** – Populist Presidential Candidate (1892)

Spoke of the United States as a model nation of God's will

“Throughout history we have had ample evidence that the new world is the theater upon which the great struggle for the rights of man is to be made, and that righteous movement is now in progress should again forcibly remind us of our enviable mission, under Providence, among the nations of the earth”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Williams, Rhys H. and Susan M. Alexander. “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33, no. 1 (March 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Accessed at [www.coursesa.matrix.msu.edu](http://www.coursesa.matrix.msu.edu)

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Williams and Alexander originally from Weaver, James B. (1892) “A Call to Action: An Interpretation of the Great Uprising, its Sources and Causes. Des Moines: Iowa Printing Company.

c. **Mary Ellen Lease** – Populist Figure

Prominent female politician (Kansas) and fiery Populist orator  
“From the days of Esau to the present time two classes of people have existed on this earth, the one class who live by honest labor, the other who live off honest labor ... [T]he one class has lived by tilling the soil, raising the flocks and herds ... over which God has given them dominion. The other class consisted of roving bandits ... plundering the honest toilers”<sup>5</sup>

d. **Milford W. Howard** – Congress (Ala), 1895-1899

i. “If Christ Came to Congress” – A struggle would ensue of the people versus the plutocrats for control of the destiny of the U.S. and would result in a mighty revolution.

ii. “The American Plutocracy”<sup>6</sup>

“Oh, plutocracy, thou friend of the rich and robber of the poor, surely the vengeance of a just God will soon be visited upon thee” (37)

“... capital has been placed above labor, thus reversing the laws of God” (103).

**V Why the Stauffer model?**

Explanative Power

Development of a different theoretical lens (religion) from which to view human interaction

Primary Source Interpretation – Qualitative Richness of Narrative

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Williams and Alexander originally from Lease, Mary Elizabeth (1892) Speech Before Literary League of Wichita, KS.

<sup>6</sup> Accessed at [www.googlebooks.com](http://www.googlebooks.com)