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The first major biography in almost 40 years of a seminal figure  
in the history of religion and politics in America

# A GODLY HERO

## THE LIFE OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

by **Michael Kazin**

**“There is no better way to begin to understand  
the politics of the turn of the last century  
than to read this book.” —SEAN WILENTZ**

**“A real eye-opener...**

**History that remains solidly relevant today.**

“Kazin summarizes in just one chapter Bryan’s first 30 years: birth in 1860, Illinois childhood, study of law, marriage to Mary Elizabeth Baird.

“The biographer’s real interest lies in Bryan’s public career, jumping quickly into Bryan’s move to Nebraska and subsequent terms in Congress, beginning in 1890. The author argues that his subject was the first politician to envision a government that, through its expansive powers, could do great things for ordinary people. His populism sprang from his Christianity, and if his ‘progressive interpretation of the Gospels’ never got him elected to the White House (he ran for president three times), it did earn him the enthusiastic devotion of tens of thousands of Americans.

“A gifted orator, Bryan frequently lectured on tariffs and the gold standard. Later, he took

up the causes of anti-imperialism, prohibition and women’s suffrage; as Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of State, he was a strong advocate of peace. Americans today, however, remember him mostly as the diehard opponent of evolution depicted in the popular play *Inherit the Wind*. Kazin revisits the well-known scene from the 1925 Scopes trial, but he also usefully contextualizes Bryan’s hostility toward the theory of evolution: In addition to believing that it ‘opened the door wide to immoral behavior,’ he worried about the slippery slope from Darwinism to eugenics.

“History that remains solidly relevant today, and a real eye-opener for anyone who thinks that fierce debates over tax reform, corporate power, imperialism and evolution are recent developments in American politics and culture.” —*Kirkus*, starred review

**“To understand the politics of our own time we must first understand William Jennings Bryan. Kazin gives us an elegant study of this forgotten but seminal figure, a hero to liberals and evangelicals alike.”**

—THOMAS FRANK, author of *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*

**“A Godly Hero is a superb reminder of the virtues of  
the American populist tradition.” —ROBERT DALLEK**

MICHAEL KAZIN is professor of history at Georgetown University. He is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, and *The American Prospect*. The author of three previous books, he is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson Center, and twice from the Fulbright Scholar Program.

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