

# The Scopes Trial and America's Multiple Modernities

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## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik  
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for assistance.

## GOALS

- To provide fresh primary resources and instructional approaches for use with students
- To explore how the Scopes “monkey” trial:
  - 1) served as a showcase for the debates over the teaching of evolution in the 1920s
  - 2) captured the conflict between different visions of America in the twentieth century— America's “multiple modernities”
  - 3) continues to be a symbol of America’s contested political culture today

## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Did Scopes initiate the teaching of the evolution lesson or was he prompted to by others?
- What happened to the Tennessee law after the trial?
- Did the more liberal Christian community express itself in public about the trial at the time?
- How did the rise of the media in the 1920s affect the trial?
- How did the trial influence other state laws?
- How was the teaching of evolution handled in other states?
- Did Americans at the time see the trial as a dividing line between traditional and modernity?

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Research Interests: American religion and politics, particularly religious fundamentalism and political conservatism.

*In the Beginning: Fundamentalism, the Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement* (2007)

*Redeeming America* (1993)

*New Order of the Ages* (1988)



## CONTEXT

- The early twentieth century was marked by competing visions of modern America
- Fundamentalism was a modern political movement
- Almost half of all Americans today accept a biblical version of creation

“The tendency of Darwinianism, although unsupported by any substantial fact in nature, since no species has been shown to come from any other species, is to destroy faith in a personal God, faith in the Bible as an inspired Book, and faith in Christ as Son and Saviour.”

## Focus Question

In Bryan’s thinking, why did Darwinism represent such a threat to orthodox religion?

“The right of the tax-payers to decide what shall be taught can hardly be disputed. Someone must decide. The hand that writes the pay-check rules the school; if not, to whom shall the right to decide such important matters be entrusted?”

## Focus Questions

Do tax-payers have the right to decide what shall be taught in the public schools? If not the tax-payers, then who should decide? Why?

“The greatest exponents of evolution, such as Darwin, Huxley, Asa Gray, and Weismann, have maintained that there is evidence of some governance and plan in Nature. This is the fundamental article of all religious faith.”

## Focus Questions

Conklin, who is himself a scientist, sees science and religion as compatible. In fact, he seems to see science as an essential element of modern faith.

Were the debates over evolution really between religion and science?  
Or between two different kinds of faith?

“Or, as they are now beginning to do, they are playing the baby act, and whining for what they call ‘Academic Freedom,’ ‘Academic Liberty.’ One of them has recently put it thus: ‘The teacher should be allowed to teach as he sincerely believes. Not otherwise can he retain his self-respect, the confidence of his pupils or the respect of the public.’ I deny it!”

## Focus Questions

What is “academic freedom,” and what are its limits?  
Should teachers be allowed to teach anything they sincerely believe?  
Where is the line drawn, and by whom?

“The Bible and Evolution do not agree. They do not agree because the Bible is a fact and Evolution is not a fact. Evolution is a theory. A theory is a plan or scheme based on principles such as seems to agree with facts or may not agree. Theory is an open field of speculation. The ablest minds have been out in that endless field of speculation.”

## Focus Questions

What is the difference between a fact and a theory?  
Is a scientific theory a “speculation?”

“Evolution is a great fact that emancipates woman from a lot of nonsense heretofore pressed upon her.”

## Focus Questions

How does evolution emancipate woman?  
What is the argument of this editorial?

“In Tennessee bigotry is militant and sincere; intelligence is timid and hypocritical, and in that fact lies the explanation of the sorry role which she is playing in contemporary history.”

## Focus Questions

Who does Krutch think is most at fault in the debates over the Scopes trial? Why?

“I can hardly speak for others, but for John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century....”

## **Focus Questions**

Why does Davidson see the Scopes trial as being primarily about the South?

How does he propose that Southerners respond the trial?

# *The World's Most Famous Court Trial, Tennessee Evolution Case*

**“Gen. Stewart**—I want to interpose another objection. What is the purpose of this examination?

**Mr. Bryan**—The purpose is to cast ridicule on everybody who believes in the Bible, and I am perfectly willing that the world shall know that these gentlemen have no other purpose than ridiculing every Christian who believes in the Bible.

**Mr. Darrow**—We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States and you know it, and that is all....

**Mr. Bryan**—I am not trying to get anything into the record. I am simply trying to protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States. (Prolonged applause)....”

## **Focus Questions**

What happened in the famous confrontation between Bryan and Darrow?

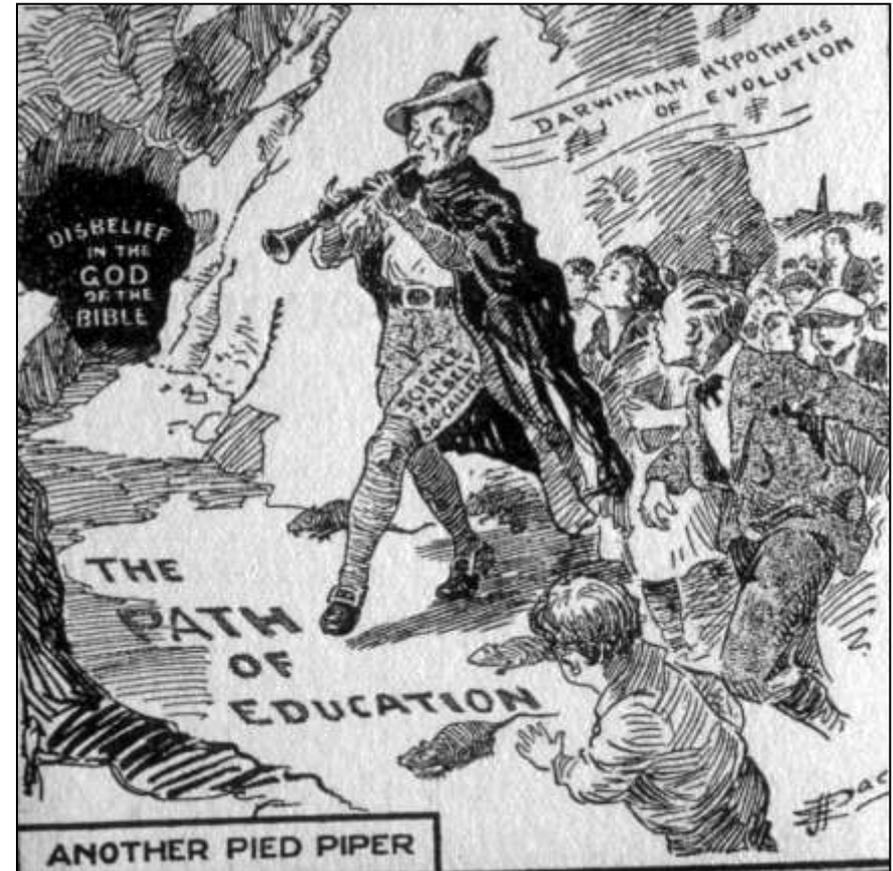
Who won (if anyone)?

How should we think about this moment in American life?

# The World's Most Famous Court Trial, Tennessee Evolution Case



Anti-Bryan



Anti-Darrow

# Persistent Presence of Creationism

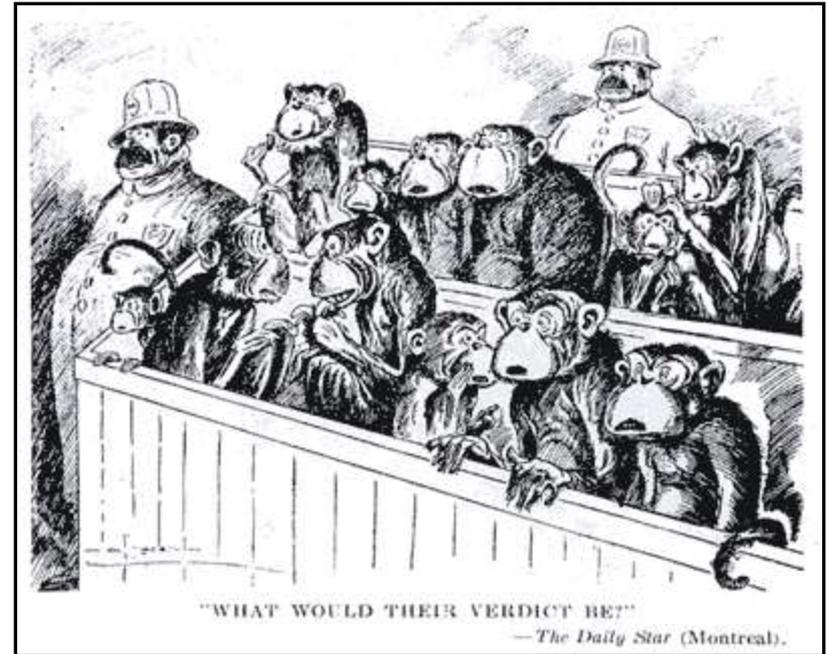
“There is surely more to come. For in spite of continuing opposition and repeated setbacks, creationists have made it clear that this movement is not going away.”

## Focus Questions

What are the “repeated setbacks” that advocates of creationism have faced since the time of the Scopes trial, and how have they responded to them?

What does this dynamic tell us about the character of American democracy today?

# From the Monkeys' Perspective



*The (Montreal) Daily Star*

*The Chicago Defender*

**Final slide.**

**Thank You**