

Modern vs Conservative: The Scopes “Monkey” Trial

Science and Religion Clash in the Roaring Twenties: When a young teacher named John T. Scopes taught evolution in his high school science class in the 1925, he was taken to court for violating state laws. No event encapsulates the modern battle over religion and science as does the Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925. Although Scopes was eventually convicted of violating Tennessee law by teaching evolution in a public school classroom, the matter wasn't settled, of course. The debate over evolution, and whether an irreconcilable divide existed between religion and science, had raged long before John Scopes entered the classroom, and continues to this day.

Science Clashes with Religion

WWI helped usher in a era of unprecedented change that was not welcomed by all. An increasing divide developed between conservative groups who wanted to hold fast to tradition and who opposed change (groups like the KKK) and modernists who embraced the changing times (flappers, for example). This divide was reflected in debates regarding multiple aspects of life in the 1920s—prohibition, music, technology, race, immigration, and science and religion.

In terms of science and religion, most modernists accepted new scientific theories and viewed them as compatible with religion. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, believed that the Bible was literal and oftentimes viewed scientific theories as incompatible with and contrary to Christianity. They also opposed the “sins” of modern life—from the “immoral” speakeasies and dance crazes to the controversial movies and jazz music. In the 1920s, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution was not new (he published in 1859), but its growing acceptance posed yet another challenge to Fundamentalists. In response, states like Tennessee passed laws banning the teaching of Evolution in public schools, leading organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union to challenge the law. Enter John Scopes, a substitute biology teacher who agreed to teach Evolution as a challenge to the law. [Click here if you want to watch Drunk History’s Scopes Trial.](#)

Document 1: The Butler Act

Between 1921 and 1929, Fundamentalists introduced 37 anti-evolution bills into 20 state legislatures. The first law, called the Butler Act, was passed in Tennessee.

“It shall be unlawful for any teacher . . . to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine (godly) Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.”

Document 2: A Civic Biology, 1925 (textbook)

The Butler Act made it illegal to teach from textbooks like this one. John Scopes could not remember if he actually taught the section on evolution from this textbook, but volunteered to say that he did in order to challenge the legality of Butler Act.

The great English scientist Charles Darwin explained the theory of evolution. This is the belief that simple forms of life on the earth slowly gave rise to more complex forms...There once lived races of men who were much lower in their mental organization than present people. If we follow the early history of man, we find that at first he must have been little better than one of the lower animals. Gradually he must have learned to use weapons and kill his prey...Man then began to farm the fields, and to have permanent houses. Civilization began long ago, but even today the earth is not entirely civilized...

Document 3: Letter to the Editor, Tennessee, 1925

Many citizens wrote letters to Tennessee’s newspapers in response to the Butler Act. Below is an excerpt from a letter written by a parent.

“When the bill against the teaching of evolution in public schools was passed...they were protecting our children from one of the destructive forces which . . . will destroy our civilization...I for one was grateful that they stood up for what was right. And grateful, too, that we have a Christian man for governor who will defend the Word of God against this so-called science.”

Document 4: 2 Opposing Views on the Trial

The following excerpts reflect the competing visions of freedom and liberty represented in the trial.

Dudley Field Malone was a New York attorney who was on the defense team, defending John Scopes. He argued for the importance of teaching science.

John Roach Straton was a minister who preached across the country against the sins of modern life. He was firmly opposed to the teaching of evolution.

“For God’s sake let the children have their minds kept open—close no doors to their knowledge. Make the distinction between religion and science. Let them have both. Let them both be taught. Let them both live. We feel we stand with progress. We feel we stand with science. We feel we stand with intelligence. We feel we stand with freedom in America.”

“John Scopes’s lawyers left New York and Chicago, where real religion is ignored, where crime is most widespread, and they came to Tennessee to save a community where women are still honored, where men are still polite, where laws are still respected, where home life is still sweet, where the marriage vow is still sacred. Think of the nerve of it!”

Document 5: *New York Times* article, 1925

The New York Times covered the Scopes trial extensively. Its editorials condemned the Butler Act and sided with the defense. Media coverage helped swell the population of the sleepy town of Dayton, as thousands flocked to see the trial.

Tennessee came to Dayton today in overalls to attend the trial of John Scopes for the teaching of evolution. The Tennesseans came from mountain farms near Dayton, where work, usually begun at day light, had been deserted so that gaunt, tanned, toil-worn men and women and shy children might see William Jennings Bryan’s “duel to the death” with “enemies of the Bible.” They stood in groups under the trees, listening to evangelists, moved by the occasion to speak for the “Word.” They listened to blind minstrels, who sang mountain hymns and promises of reward for the faithful, and to a string quartet of negroes. They walked up and down hot, dusty Market Street, with its buildings hung with banners, and lined with soda-water, sandwich, and book stalls, as for a carnival. Religion and business had become strangely mixed.

*Minstrels, a popular form of entertainment in the 1920s, were whites who wore blackface to portray blacks in stereotypical, racist ways.

Document 5: The Anti-Evolution League selling its publications outside the Tennessee courthouse where the Scopes trial was taking place.

The Scopes Trial served as a platform for both sides of the debate to promote their viewpoints as thousands flocked to Dayton.



Document 6: “Playing It for all It’s Worth,” 1925

Newspapers all over the country covered the Scopes trial in the tiny town of Dayton, giving the people of this small town a degree of publicity that would have otherwise been unimaginable. In fact, Scopes agreed to take up the ACLU’s proposal to challenge the Butler Act because he knew it would bring publicity and, as a result, money to the small town.

Playing It for All It's Worth



Document 7: Scopes Trial Transcript, 1925

The following is testimony from the trial. Mr. Darrow was the lawyer representing the defense (Scopes) and Mr. Bryan was William Jennings Bryan, the prosecutor.

Mr. Bryan: Your honor. I think I can shorten this testimony. The only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slur at the Bible, but I will answer his question. I will answer it all at once, and I have no objection in the world, I want the world to know that this man, who does not believe in God, is trying to use a court in Tennessee

Mr. Darrow: I object to that.

Mr. Bryan: (Continuing) to slur at it, and while it will require time, I am willing to take it.

Mr. Darrow: I object to your statement. I am examining you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes.