

“I Don’t Know About This Monkey Business”: Students and the Antievolution Movement, 1909-1935

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Abstract:

As Christian fundamentalism gained strength in American political culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, debate sparked over whether or not the theory of evolution should be taught in science classrooms. When John Thomas Scopes was indicted for teaching the theory in Tennessee in 1925 in violation of a recent fundamentalist law, the debate reached the national stage. Yet although the controversy included the voices of politicians, parents, pastors, and many others, the voices of students seemed unheard, even by historians who have since written about this debate. Primary documents telling their story are available, however, and together they display that students in the 1920s were far less in danger of abandoning Christianity after learning about evolution than fundamentalists proclaimed.

Introduction

Standing outside of a courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee in 1975, sixty-seven-year-old Harry “Bud” Shelton thought back to fifty years prior, when he had been called to the witness stand in what many would refer to as “the trial of the century.” It was in this courthouse in 1925 that Shelton testified at the trial of his teacher, John Thomas Scopes, who had been indicted for teaching evolution, a violation of Tennessee’s recently passed antievolution law. “They used to call us Monkey Town,” Shelton recalled. “You don’t hear much talk about that anymore.”¹

Tennessee’s law banning the teaching of evolution was the culmination of Christian fundamentalist efforts in the early twentieth century to ensure that schools did not damage the faith of students. Passed with the

intention of preventing belief in divine creation from being challenged by instruction about the descent of humans from a “lower order of animals,” the law returned control of science education to parents who wanted schools to protect the faith of their children.

Debate about the role of religion in schools was not new in 1925. Some Americans had long feared the impact schools could have on the religiosity of students. As early as 1840, for example, when New York’s Common Council convened to discuss a petition by Catholic New Yorkers to allocate public funds to support schools tied to Catholic churches, Bishop John Hughes argued against non-sectarian education, contending that non-sectarianism was just another religion and that students were even at risk of becoming irreligious as a result of that education.

¹ Boyce Rensberger, “Evolution Theory Still Disputed 50 Years After ‘Monkey Trial.’” *New York Times*. July 8, 1975.

Hughes asked, “To make an infidel, what is it necessary to do? Cage him up in a room, give him a secular education from the age of five years to twenty-one, and I ask you what he will not come out, if not an infidel?”²

The ideas of infidelity and apostasy would become important in defining whether or not evolution was dangerous for students to learn. A fundamentalist movement began to swell in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century, as changes in science shifted thinking on evolutionary science and public interest in the subject. Although initially ambivalent toward evolutionary science (and its inclusion in schools), the growing community of fundamentalists soon shifted its attention toward schools and science curricula. Soon after, arguments similar to those of Bishop Hughes in 1840—that teaching certain topics could be damaging to the religiosity of students—led a decades-long national debate about whether or not evolution should have a place in secondary science classrooms.

The voices of adults—politicians, religious figures, parents, and teachers—are well-documented. Historians have thoroughly researched early twentieth-century developments in science, the rise of fundamentalism, and the rhetoric professed both for and against the teaching of evolution. Michael Lienesch, author of *In the Beginning*, charts the rise of fundamentalism at a time in which new scientific discoveries led to advances in evolutionary science. Edward Larson goes on to discuss how these fundamentalists turned their attention toward schools and

began to argue that evolution would be threatening to the faith of students forced to learn about it. However, these authors, among others, largely ignore the role of these students and whether or not they thought of evolution in the same way.

Although pastors, politicians, parents, administrators, and more often argued that evolution was dangerous for students to learn because it taught un-biblical ideas and risked turning students into apostates, the students themselves did not view evolution as dangerous or threatening to their faith in Christianity. Speaking both during the period in which the antievolution movement rose (particularly during the mass-media event that was the Scopes trial of 1925) and in the decades after, students expressed a variety of views, none of which point to them being at risk of apostasy as a result of learning about evolution. These perspectives include a lack of knowledge about the specifics of the theory, continued faith in Christianity, and even a general lack of interest in the subject as a whole. More than anything, the evidence points to a disconnect between what adults thought about the impacts of teaching evolution and how students actually felt impacted by the inclusion of the theory in the science curriculum.

The student voices add a new perspective to the debate on the teaching of evolution in the early twentieth century. Of course, it is possible that the students who believed that evolution had little impact on them or their faith at this time were incorrect in their self-assessment, but it is also important to consider that fundamentalists

² John Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 94-95.

may have over-assessed the risk evolution posed to students. But long before the students were even able to begin voicing their own thoughts on the issue, the debate would arise out of a combination of a mounting fundamentalist movement and the rapidly changing field of evolutionary science.

Developments in Science and the Rise of Fundamentalism

Evolutionary science took a leap forward in 1909 when English geologist Charles Dawson found a fragment of a skull at the Piltdown Farm in Sussex. In 1911, another part of the same skull was found. Searches continued through 1912, unearthing an ape-like jaw and human-like teeth from a hominid creature. Dawson and anthropologist Arthur Smith Woodward presented their findings to the Geological Society of London in December 1912, at which time they suggested that the Piltdown fragments were the first evidence of a common ancestor for humans and Neanderthals, providing a long-sought “missing link” in the fossil record.³ These findings were almost immediately contested, and some sought to discourage people from considering the findings to be part of human ancestry. One writer for the *New York Times* wrote that “the jawbone and other skull pieces dug up from the gravel pit in Sussex were of a reasoning being who before the glacial times, millions of years ago, struggled successfully for existence. But he was no forebear to our Adam.”⁴ However, the Sussex findings were significant to many

in science, and despite any disputes over whether or not the fragments unearthed by Dawson belonged to those of a human ancestor, it did lend credence to the theory proposed by Charles Darwin just a half a century prior.

Prior to Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species*, theories about evolution and the formation of the earth had posed little challenge to Christianity. Many of these ideas had even been reconciled with Christianity during their development, such as the postulation by geologists Edward Hitchcock and James D. Dana that the days in which God created the earth represented geological eras.⁵ Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the idea that only the fittest survive was far more threatening to Christianity than these previous ideas because its implications for religion were that God was random and cruel rather than loving, the long-standing Christian characterization of God.⁶ As fundamentalism gained traction across the US and teachers began to include Darwinism in science curricula, this threat became increasingly intolerable.

The seeds of the antievolution movement were planted in August 1909—the same year as Dawson’s initial discovery in Sussex—when preacher AC Dixon gave a sermon that moved millionaire Lyman Stewart to publish a series of volumes entitled *The Fundamentals*, a popular series that helped to spread a new analysis of Christian theology from which antievolution

³ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 11-12. Hereafter referred to as *Summer*.

⁴ “Simian Man.” *New York Times*. December 22, 1912.

⁵ *Summer*, p. 14-16.

⁶ *Summer*, p. 17.

would eventually develop.⁷ Written with the intent of obtaining a wide-ranging audience comprised of lay people and biblical scholars alike, *The Fundamentals* helped Christians form into a community by helping them to develop collective consciousness, “a consciousness of themselves as part of a larger body of like-minded Christian conservatives.”⁸ As this community developed and spread, fundamentalists became far more organized than the Christian conservatives who had first spoken out against Darwin’s work decades before.⁹

The Fundamentals had much to say about science and religion but little about evolution directly, particularly in the first few editions. Some authors were critical, some confused, and others even argued that evolution was compatible with creation, with the exception of the scientific assertion that humans had evolved from a nonhuman ancestor—after all, the Bible said nothing of the creation of animals in God’s image, only man. However, upon the publication of the series’ seventh volume in 1912, writers began to shift from religious theoretical matters to practical matters, seeking to defend Christianity from its enemies. From this point forward, science and faith were portrayed as less compatible than before, especially as fundamentalists became more concerned that science was becoming increasingly secular. After 1912, these writers ceased to accept evolutionary theories due to the belief that evolutionists posed a direct threat to Christianity.¹⁰

⁷ Michael Lienesch, *In the Beginning: Fundamentalism, The Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

⁹ *Ibid.*

It was at this time that concern about the inclusion of evolution in schools first began to develop. In his 1912 essay “The Decadence of Darwinism,” Colorado minister Harry Beach brought the issue to the attention of his readers, providing a warning that “sounded like an alarm bell awakening fundamentalists to the threat posed by their Darwinist enemies.”¹¹ By 1915, the year in which the final volume of *The Fundamentals* was published, fundamentalist identity was firmly established. Afterward, they could exist not just as a community of Christians but as a force that could mobilize its ideas into American institutions.¹² Among these were the country’s schools.

Schools and the Rhetoric of Danger

Over forty years after the trial that made him famous, John Thomas Scopes, the teacher indicted in 1925 for teaching evolution in Tennessee, recalled in his memoirs that “by 1925, the high tides of Christian Fundamentalism threatened to engulf the nation.”¹³ Although this characterization is arguably dramatic, fundamentalists were on the move, and as evolution crept into the curricula taught by public schools, the need to protect Christianity from its perceived enemies only seemed more important.

Like fundamentalism, public school enrollment was on the rise in the early twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1920, American high school enrollment increased ten-fold. Dayton, Tennessee, the site of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21-28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³ John T. Scopes and James Presley, *Center of the Storm: Memoirs of John T. Scopes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), p. 45.

Scopes trial, first gained its own public high school just nineteen years prior to the trial, in 1906.¹⁴ Within these schools, high school botany, zoology, and historical zoology courses were consolidated into single classes on biology, a merge that was followed by the publication of the first secondary biology textbook in 1907.¹⁵

Science textbooks had once treated evolutionary theory with a spin focusing on genetic variations within organisms as part of the design of the Creator. This emphasis switched to Darwinism in the early twentieth century, a time during which the number of science textbooks soon increased sharply; nine of these texts ultimately underwent multiple editions, and each taught about evolution. Old formats for teaching science were replaced with evolutionary concepts and methods of learning about biology. Some of these texts even went on to offer critiques of creationism.¹⁶ By 1904, before this spike in texts, future secondary science teachers were taught in normal schools that they needed to teach about evolution, and they were even given advice on how to transition to including evolution. One text suggested that teachers begin by teaching parents about evolution via parent-teacher associations before moving on to teaching students. Although this approach seems amiable enough, it was not a stretch for some parents to see evolution as problematic for their children to learn. One article even declared that it was the duty of teachers to correct students in the supposedly incorrect

knowledge gained from Sunday school teachings.¹⁷

Despite an increase in public high school enrollment and an increase in the number of biology texts, however, enrollment in life science courses was actually falling by the 1920s, suggesting that the focus of the fundamentalists on schools cannot be connected specifically to increased emphasis by secondary schools on evolutionary science.¹⁸ Historian George Marsden offers some clarification on this matter by exploring how the fundamentalist movement turned its attention to schools as part of an effort to gain the attention of Christians who believed that any inclusion of Darwinism in schools was dangerous for their children. Marsden writes,

"Many people with little or no interest in fundamentalism's doctrinal concerns were drawn into the campaign to keep Darwinism out of America's schools. Those premillennialist leaders who had adopted the cause of antievolution experienced a radical metamorphosis within the space of a few years. Having gained the attention of the increasingly influential mass media, they seemed to have found the key to success they had long been seeking. The more clearly they realized that there was a mass audience for this message of the social danger of evolution, the more central this message became."¹⁹

¹⁴ *Summer*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy Over Creation and Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 20. Hereafter referred to as *Trial and Error*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 17-19, 23.

¹⁷ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 23-24.

¹⁸ *Trial and Error*, p. 25-26.

¹⁹ Marsden, p. 170.

That message of the “social danger of evolution” was vital to the antievolution cause and was the key theme in the arguments of those who opposed the teaching of evolution. Much of the early rhetoric at the time of the Scopes trial against the teaching of evolution focused on whether or not evolution could be considered science because studying evolution relied, in part, on the interpretation of fossils. For some, this was not scientific enough to justify inclusion in a science classroom.²⁰ As the crusade against evolution mounted, however, the danger evolution posed to the Christian faith of students became the focus.

Fundamentalists concerned with the faith of their children found multiple champions, none more famous or more documented for his antievolution work than former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. A devout Christian instrumental in spreading the belief that evolution was harmful for students to learn, Bryan argued that evolution was dangerous because the theory made “no mention of religion, the only basis for morality; not a suggestion of a sense of responsibility to God ... Darwinism transforms the Bible into a story book and reduces Christ to man’s level.”²¹ This argument spoke in particular to those fundamentalists who had long believed that evolution itself was not dangerous but became dangerous when it challenged the creation of man in God’s image and failed to address the importance of religion. In this failure, Bryan said “the instructor gives the

student a new family tree millions of years long...with infinite capacity for good or evil but with no light to guide him, no compass to direct him and no chart of the sea of life!”²²

This argument was important for Bryan in proving that evolution was dangerous because it allowed him to suggest teaching about the theory immediately taught un-Christian ideas, although without attacking Christianity itself. From this point, Bryan could make the argument that teaching the theory by extension taught students to think about the Bible and its teachings differently than before and thereby begin to turn toward apostasy. Bryan wrote that “fathers and mothers complain of their children losing their interest in religion and speaking lightly of the Bible. This begins when they come under the influence of a teacher who accepts Darwin’s guess, ridicules the Bible story of creation and instructs the child upon the basis of the brute theory.”²³

If students were losing their faith in Christianity as a result of learning about evolution, then, Bryan suggested the loss of belief would result in a loss of all that mankind gained through faith in Christ by reducing “his power to measure up to his opportunities and responsibilities.”²⁴ Bryan went on to connect this issue specifically to the teaching of evolution, writing “the hypothesis to which the name of Darwin has been given—the hypothesis that links man to the lower forms of life and makes him a lineal descendant of the brute—is obscuring God and weakening all the virtues that rest

²⁰ *Summer*, p. 7.

²¹ William Jennings Bryan, *In His Image* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1922), p. 112. Hereafter referred to as *In His Image*.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ William Jennings Bryan, “God and Evolution: Charge That American Teachers of Darwinism ‘Make the Bible a Scrap of Paper.’” *New York Times*. February 26, 1922. Hereafter referred to as “God and Evolution.”

²⁴ *In His Image*, p. 87-88.

upon the religious tie between God and man.”²⁵

This obscuration of God was simply intolerable for fundamentalists. Fundamentalists were not necessarily against science but instead opposed scientific teachings that threatened to, as Bryan wrote, obscure God. Tennessee attorney general A.T. Stewart, who worked with Bryan in the prosecution of Scopes in 1925, described this boundary while speaking at the trial: “We have the right to participate in scientific investigation, but, if the court please, when science strikes upon that which man’s eternal hope is founded, then I say the foundation of man’s civilization is about to crumble. Shut the door to science when science sets a canker on the soul of a child.”²⁶ To them, evolution was one scientific theory that posed such as a threat, and as a result, legal action had to be taken.

The first time fundamentalist arguments about the danger of evolution found a way into the legal system occurred in 1922, when Kentucky considered a ban on the teaching of evolution that was narrowly defeated. Considerations in New York and Texas soon followed but also failed.²⁷ Fundamentalist politicians were finally successful in Oklahoma, when Darwinism was banned from the state texts in 1923.²⁸ North Carolina did the same in 1924, when the state’s governor argued that “evolution means progress, but it does not mean that man, God’s highest creation, is descended from a monkey or any other animal. I do not believe he is and I will not consent for any

such doctrine or intimation of such doctrine to be taught in our schools.”²⁹

This commentary displayed again that fundamentalists did not consider evolution to be a dangerous theory on its own. Their primary concern lay in the teaching of human evolution, the idea that man was not created in the image of God but had instead evolved via a random process of natural selection and genetic variation. To suggest that humans had evolved from “brutes,” as Bryan called them, placed humans on the level of all other animals and not as a product of divine creation; to fundamentalists, legislatures needed to take more action to ensure this teaching was not present in publicly-funded schools. Bryan echoed this sentiment:

“Our opponents are not fair. When we find fault with the teaching of Darwin’s unsupported hypothesis, they talk about Copernicus and Galileo and ask whether we shall exclude science and return to the dark ages. Their evasion is a confession of weakness. We do not ask for the exclusion of any scientific truth, but we do protest against an atheist teacher being allowed to blow his guesses in the face of the student. The Christians who want to teach religion in their schools furnish the money for denominational institutions. If atheists want to teach atheism, why do they not build their own schools and employ their own teachers? If a man really believes that he has brute blood in him, he can teach that to his children at home or he can send them

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Summer*, p. 179.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 43.

²⁸ *Trial and Error*, p. 7.

²⁹ “North Carolina Bars Evolution Textbook” *The Christian Science Monitor*. January 24, 1924.

to atheistic schools, where his children will not be in danger of losing their brute philosophy, but why should he be allowed to deal with other people's children as if they were little monkeys?"³⁰

The advance of fundamentalist ideas in state legislatures continued as more Americans bought into the rhetoric of danger and came to believe that public schools should not teach about human evolution. The year after the North Carolina ban, the Georgia legislature considered an appropriations bill including a measure preventing teachers who taught "a theory of origin of man in contradiction to the Bible's account" from receiving a salary from the money appropriated to the schools.³¹ In this same year, antievolutionists achieved perhaps their greatest and certainly their most famous legal success in their battle against evolution. In Tennessee, the legislature passed an act authored by John W. Butler making it a criminal offense for any public university or school "to teach any theory that denies the story of divine creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach, instead, that man has descended from a lower order of animals."³² After signing this new ban into law, Governor Austin Peay immediately sought to explain that it was not a violation of the separation between church and state, that it only protected the students. By removing evolution from science curricula, Tennessee had stopped "an irreligious tendency to exalt so-called science and deny the Bible in some schools

and quarters—a tendency fundamentally wrong and fatally mischievous in its effects on our children, our institutions, and our country."³³

Not all adults favored these bans. Henry Fairfield Osborn, a famous geologist and paleontologist, believed science and religion should not be taught as in conflict but that students should learn that they existed symbiotically. Osborn wrote that

"Not for a moment would I substitute such a creed for the Ten Commandments, for the Lord's Prayer or for the Sermon of the Mount, but when puzzling philosophical questions difficult for the teacher to answer begin to be asked in the high school or college age of instruction, it may be pointed out step-by-step ... that Nature never relaxes but always reinforces moral and spiritual laws, that Nature may forgive but never forgets—in other words, that there can be no contradiction or conflict between Nature and religion, because primitive religion issues out of the heart of Nature in reverence for the powers of the unseen."³⁴

Few, if any, fundamentalists shared this philosophy.

Absent from all of this debating were the opinions and voices of the students, those who would be impacted most by the legislation. For the time, this is unsurprising because little consideration was generally given to the opinions of students. The lack

³⁰ "God and Evolution."

³¹ "Georgia Now Seeks Evolution Barrier." *The Christian Science Monitor*. July 29, 1925.

³² "Tennessee Bans the Teaching of Evolution; Governor Says the Bible Disproves Theory." *New York Times*. March 24, 1925.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Henry Fairfield Osborn, *Evolution and Religion in Education: Polemics of the Fundamentalist Controversy of 1922 to 1926* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925, 1926), p. 173.

of their inclusion in historiography can also be accounted for in several ways. For one, it is uncommon to find direct sources from the students themselves, especially at a time in which public high school enrollment and literacy were only just beginning to rise. Larson also accounts for the absence of some voices, showing that “in any event, the outcome would not affect African Americans, because Tennessee public schools enforced strict racial segregation and offered little to black students beyond elementary instruction.”³⁵ However, student voices were expressed in several other ways, and what they had to say stood in direct contrast to fundamentalists’ rhetoric of danger.

The Students

The Tennessee ban was immediately controversial on a national level. Hailed by fundamentalists as an important defense of Christian teachings, the legislation also made Tennessee a target for ridicule in some quarters. One cartoonist for *The Wall Street Journal* satirized the Butler Act by suggesting that students cared little, if at all, of learning about evolution until legislators declared the information dangerous for them to be taught.³⁶ Although this was a satirical argument from the perspective of a cartoonist, the statements of the students themselves suggest that this representation may not have been far off the mark.

Shortly after the passage of the Butler Act, John Thomas Scopes was indicted for teaching evolution to students at Central High School in Dayton. Scopes would later tell the press that the way he taught

evolution prevented it from weakening students’ faith; he was quoted in the *New York Times* saying, “It might have made a few of them doubt, but I do not think so. I teach only the facts of evolution as they are known, giving such theory as exists merely as a theory, and they get their religious training in their home or at Sunday school. I do not think it hurt them, and I do believe it broadened their minds.”³⁷

Scopes’s commentary could be taken to mean several things. The first is its face-value meaning: that students remained faithful, obtained scientific knowledge, and stood unchanged by having learned about the theory of evolution. However, Scopes’s comments could also be taken to mean he believed teaching evolution could be harmful if it were taught incorrectly, and that he believed he had simply taught the subject in a safe manner. What he meant remains unclear, although the future statements of his own students tend to corroborate his first explanation. Nevertheless, the state of Tennessee intended to hold Scopes accountable for his violation of the Butler Act.

Several of these students were called to testify before the grand jury prior to Scopes’s indictment. Reporters were eager to hear what these students had to say, and what they told the press provides the first indication as to what students thought about the inclusion of evolution. When interviewed after testifying, the students told reporters that Scopes had not taught enough to hurt them. At most, they finally admitted, he had expressed to them his own belief in the theory, taking them to the library and

³⁵ Summer, p. 122.

³⁶ “How They Are Teaching Evolution in Tennessee.” *Wall Street Journal*. June 2, 1925.

³⁷ “Scopes Here, Shyly Defends Evolution.” *New York Times*. June 7, 1925.

pointing out “Tarzan of the Apes.”³⁸ One reporter asked them if they knew the definition of “anthropoid ape,” a term used to describe the apparent evolutionary relationships between humans and apes, but none of the students were able to provide a description. One unnamed student told the press, “I believe in the part about evolution, but I don’t know about this monkey business.”³⁹

This final comment displays a student critique that John Butler and other Tennessee legislators may have underestimated. Fundamentalists were concerned, as Bryan had written, that teaching students about evolution would lead them to adopt a “brute philosophy” and thereby abandon their own Christian faith.⁴⁰ Although it is worth noting that the students who testified before the grand jury seemed to know of the specifics of the theory, the student’s reference to his own belief in evolution and his doubt in the “monkey” business stands against what fundamentalists had long feared—that students would not be able to divorce the theory of evolution from human evolution, the latter of which was the ultimate concern of fundamentalists.

It was established in the courtroom, however, that Scopes violated the Butler Act by expressing his beliefs about evolution and by taking students to the library to discuss the topic.⁴¹ His indictment was followed by the assembly of prosecution and defense teams for what would become a sensationalized criminal trial in small-town

Tennessee. Not long after the indictment, fundamentalist champion Bryan offered his assistance to the prosecution, while Clarence Darrow, a famous attorney known for his disbelief in Christianity, ultimately assumed responsibility for Scopes’s defense.⁴² Throughout the trial, a variety of witnesses from different backgrounds were called to discuss evolutionary science and the actions of Scopes. It was during the trial that students were given another brief opportunity to express their beliefs on the matter.

On the fourth day of the trial, two of Scopes’s students—both different from those who testified before the grand jury—were called to the witness stand to testify against their teacher. The first of the two was fourteen-year-old Howard Morgan, whose testimony was used to establish specifically what and how Scopes had taught about evolution. When asked these questions, however, Morgan repeatedly replied that he could not remember or that he did not have the knowledge of the scientific material about which he was questioned.⁴³ Upon cross-examination by Darrow, who asked whether or not it had hurt him or his faith to learn about evolution, Morgan replied that it had not.⁴⁴

Morgan’s testimony is more direct than the comments provided by the students who testified before the grand jury. Although his own testimony focused largely on what Scopes had taught rather than the impact his teachings had, it is important to note that

³⁸ Philip Kinsley, “Scopes Indicted for Teaching Evolution.” *The Commercial Appeal*. May 26, 1925.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “God and Evolution.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Philip Kinsley, “Darrow May Be Barred in Scopes Case.” *The Detroit Free Press*. May 27, 1925.

⁴³ *The World’s Most Famous Court Trial Tennessee Evolution Case: A Word-for-Word Report of the Famous Court Test of the Tennessee Anti-Evolution Act, at Dayton, July 10 to 21, 1925, Including Speeches and Arguments of Attorneys, Testimony of Noted Scientists, and Bryan’s Last Speech*. 3rd edition (Cincinnati: National Book Co., 1925), p. 127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Morgan's brief statement to Darrow suggested that learning about evolution had not led him to a path away from Christianity. After all, as one of the only students at this time who would be given the opportunity to speak publicly about his thoughts on the teaching of evolution, it is important to recognize that he only considered it one other part of the science curriculum and not as knowledge that would change his own faith.

Morgan's testimony was followed by that of seventeen-year-old Harry Shelton, whose testimony would be used by Clarence Darrow to highlight contradictions between the perceived and actual impacts learning about evolution had on children. In a brief exchange, Darrow asked Shelton about Scopes's teachings, what Shelton had learned from the experience, and his own faith in Christianity:

Q (Darrow): Prof. Scopes said that all forms of life came from a single cell, didn't he?

A (Shelton): Yes, sir.

Q: Did anybody ever tell you before?

A: No, sir.

Q: That is all you remember that he told you about biology, wasn't it?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Are you a church member?

A: Sir?

Q: Are you a church member?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Do you still belong?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: You didn't leave church when he told you all forms of life began with a single cell?

A: No, sir.⁴⁵

Reflecting on this testimony to a reporter sixty years later, Shelton's feelings on the subject had changed little. Aged seventy-seven and discussing the trial in Dayton in 1985, Shelton recalled his exchange with Darrow from that day: "He wanted to know if Scopes's teaching had affected my beliefs in any way. I told him 'Certainly not.' It had no profound impact on me. In fact, I wasn't even interested in the subject."⁴⁶

Shelton's testimony and his subsequent reflections have several implications. First, his testimony at the trial itself follows in the same path of Morgan's; that is, he directly reports to Darrow that his desire to maintain membership in his church had not changed after learning about evolution. However, it is the commentary he provided sixty years after the trial that adds an additional layer to what he said in his testimony. Any parent or politician could make the argument that the opinions of students were not necessarily worth considering due to a lower level of maturity resulting from their age. However, Shelton's statement as he approached eighty years of age reveals more about his opinions on the subject. It not only shows the lack of damage evolution had on his own religiosity but also his own lack of interest, a disinterest apparently common among students prior to and after the passage of the Butler Act.

The voices of students on this matter remained apparently unheard after the Scopes trial. Less than a year later, in February 1926, the Mississippi legislature

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Dan George, "Like the Circus Had Come to Town." *The Washington Post*. July 22, 1985.

considered making it unlawful to teach “the theory that man descended from a lower order of animals.”⁴⁷ Regardless of what these students said, fundamentalist legislators were determined to move forward.

Still, in Tennessee, the Butler Act would face a new challenge a decade after the trial, when twenty-two-year-old Cecil Anderson, who had been just a schoolboy at the time of the trial, stood in opposition to the antievolution law. By 1935, Anderson had become the youngest legislator in Tennessee and sought a repeal of the Butler Act. Making his case, Anderson said, “It seems to me that ten years of being called the ‘Monkey State’ is long enough and we have a legislature at this session which is more interested in the progress of the State than in petty academic questions.”⁴⁸ Anderson wished for Tennessee to cease being the butt of jokes, especially considering that the Scopes trial was the only time in ten years in which the Butler Act was enforced.⁴⁹ Despite this belief, Anderson and his strongest ally, Representative G. Townes Gaines, faced strong opposition in the legislature. Additionally, nearby Bryan University, named for the fundamentalist champion himself, immediately sent a letter of protest to all state legislators.⁵⁰ Anderson’s proposed repeal was eventually defeated by a vote of 67-20. However, repeal was reported as barely interesting to the general public in the midst of the Depression, and that legislators only

opposed it for fear of support being used to defeat them in their bids for reelection.⁵¹

Unfortunately, little else, if anything, is available from Anderson to provide clarity on his motives and beliefs. However, some analysis is possible. Having been a schoolboy during the passage of the Butler Act and the Scopes trial, Anderson had a unique perspective on the debate that those other legislators older than him lacked. It is significant that out of the twenty representatives who favored the bill that he, as a recent student himself, was the one who wrote and sponsored the repeal.

Although their voices were few, the students who spoke about the teaching of evolution suggest that evolution was far less dangerous than fundamentalists argued. The debate ultimately ended with the Supreme Court striking down creation-based education laws in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968). Some would raise their voices again in the future in Tennessee and elsewhere, though never to a great extent; from the beginning of the fundamentalist movement onward, the voices of students were scarcely available to be heard.

Conclusion

In the forty-three years between the passage of the Butler Act and the Court’s ruling in *Epperson v. Arkansas*, little credence was given to the opinions of the students. The reasons for this are understandable; it has not been uncommon in American history to exclude students’

⁴⁷ “Votes to Bar Evolution: Mississippi House Passes Bill to Prevent Teaching.” *New York Times*. February 9, 1926.

⁴⁸ “Antievolution Law Hit in Tennessee House Bill.” *New York Times*. January 26, 1935.

⁴⁹ Thomas Fauntleroy, “Scopes Law Dead, But State Keeps It.” *New York Times*. February 24, 1935.

⁵⁰ “Anti-Evolution Repeal Asked in Tennessee; Bryan University Protests Against the Bill.” *New York Times*. February 16, 1935.

⁵¹ Fauntleroy.

voices on many topics. However, in the case of teaching evolution in the early twentieth century, the contradictions between what adults believed the impacts on students would be and what the students believed the impacts would be are significant to point out.

Not all adults remained convinced that the effects of evolution on students were minimal. Attorney John Godsey, who was associated with the Scopes defense but did not participate in the trial, argued that children had the right “to seek the truth, a teacher the right to teach it.” Judge John T. Raulston, who had presided over the Scopes trial and had once sided with more fundamentalist teachings and beliefs, later came to question the authority of a legislature to restrict the teaching of science when the morality of students was not in danger.⁵²

Yet exercise this authority the legislatures did. It is important to consider that the fundamentalists who believed in the

rhetoric of danger regarding the faith of their children could have been right; many sources that may have given voice to the students are not available, and although those that did speak out—such as Morgan, Shelton, and Anderson—said evolution had no impact on their own faith, it is possible that there were effects they did not recognize at the time. Likewise, in failing to consider the opinions of the students, fundamentalists may have overestimated the influence learning about evolution would have.

Indeed, looking back on the trial over half a century later, Harry Shelton must have mused over the effort put into ensuring he and his fellow students never abandoned their Christian faith. More than anyone, he must have understood the disconnect between the students and the fundamentalists; he truly must have known better than anyone how little they apparently had to fear at all. And so the “monkey business” continued on.

⁵² “John T. Raulston, jurist, 87, dead.” *New York Times*. July 12, 1956.

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