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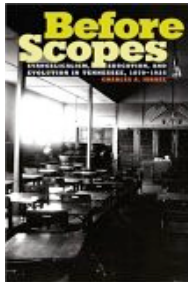
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Charles A. Israel. *Before Scopes: Evangelicalism, Education, and Evolution in Tennessee, 1870-1825*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. 272 pp. ISBN 0-8203-2646-1. Reviewed by Karl Giberson for the *Journal of Southern Religion*.

Anti-evolution from Dayton to Dover

World War I, charged the editor of the Methodist *Nashville Christian Advocate*, was the natural consequence of “the materialistic education of Germany, stripped of Christian ethics and resting on the ethics of the jungle.”¹ The editor’s judgment reflected the view of many Tennesseans in the years leading up to the Scopes Trial. Pundits across the South made the same argument to their constituencies. William Jennings Bryan took the argument to national audiences. Governments and school boards, largely but not entirely in the South, debated the practical questions of education and how it might best serve the families whose children were turned over to it. German education had clearly failed its citizens, so too did the education of liberal, secular Massachusetts, for that matter.

“... Israel documents a perspective on public education that, in the half-century prior to Scopes, went from opposition to accommodation to control.”

Before Scopes is historian Charles A. Israel’s brief but somewhat ponderous analysis of the confluence of factors that created the perfect storm that was the trial of John Scopes in 1925 for teaching evolution to the public schoolchildren of Dayton, Tennessee. Focusing on the Baptists and Methodists, who comprised the majority of the residents, Israel documents a perspective on public education that, in the half-century prior to Scopes, went from opposition to

accommodation to control.

Tennesseans initially considered education to be the responsibility of the family and the church, opposing proposals to create public schools lest they “estrangle children from the faith and culture of their parents.”² But practical considerations, like the failure of families to actually educate their children, eventually motivated many to make their peace with public education, provided the teachers were solid Christians and the programs were not overly secular. As the enrollments in public schools began to climb, consideration of the hiring of teachers, the role of bible reading, and related concerns moved front and center. Tennessee Christians believed they were building a Christian society. It would serve as an example to the United States and the rest of the world of just how blessed a society might be if it took God’s plan seriously. By contrast, Germany offered a frightening example of what happened when public education lost its religious moorings.

As public education became ever more public, and the curriculum secularized, Tennesseans grew alarmed. The weakening connections between the public schools and the local communities they served seemed inadequate to ensure that the former would serve the latter. Concerns expressed by Jewish and Catholic minorities about the overt Protestantism of the curriculum raised awkward questions. Out of these and related concerns emerged a need to exercise control over a curriculum that appeared to be evolving on its own.

The most infamous of these curricular controls was House Bill 185, submitted to the General Assembly of Tennessee in 1925 by John Washington Butler and passed, after some political shenanigans, by a vote of 24 to 6. The bill forbade the teaching of evolution. The rest, as they say,

is history and is summarized in the short chapter that concludes the book.

Israel's account, while dry and over-documented (there are 50 more names listed in the index than there are pages in the book) sheds considerable light on the continuing controversy over the teaching of evolution in America's public high schools, at least outside Massachusetts. The story of this conflict is not a peculiarly southern tale. Though the South witnessed much light and heat on the issue, Dixie held no monopoly on the controversy. Indeed, an analysis of the cultural developments that led to the recent Dover, Pennsylvania, trial, or the 1999 Kansas decision to drop evolution from its list of topics on which students would be tested, or the verdicts that will be making news in the next few years, would have much in common with Israel's account of Tennessee in the half century after Darwin.

Then, and now, we must note that the debate about evolution is not about evolution at all. Neither Butler, nor Bryan, nor Scopes really cared about evolution. The infamous textbook that Scopes used, Hunter's *A Civic Biology*, had but a few pages on evolution and those were very tame. Likewise, the 2005 school board in Dover did not care about evolution as a scientific theory. America's ongoing aversion to evolution is best understood as a reaction to the ideological baggage of the theory. A great many leaders in Tennessee were absolutely convinced that evolution had led Germany into World War I. The implied materialism and "might makes right" sociology were scary. Evolution also threatened general public morality, which was broadly perceived as deriving from the special relationship between God and man, a relationship challenged by suggestions that man had an animal ancestry.

In Bryan's classic *In His Image*, published in 1922, he developed an argument that belief in evolution was like trying to tell time with a broken mainspring in a watch. Morality, he argued, was "dependent upon religion," and religion was "the most practical thing in the world." Anything that challenged this—that broke the mainspring of the moral order—is a menace and must be opposed.

"I believe there is such a menace to fundamental reality," he writes. "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 descendent of the brute—is obscuring God and weakening all the virtues that rest upon the religious tie between God and man."³

Bryan's argument was fundamentally teleological, not scientific. He made the case that evolution was bad for society and should be opposed on that ground. He continued with a critique of Darwin's theory, which he called a mere "hypothesis" or a "guess."⁴

These were the arguments that Bryan and others developed in the years leading up to the Scopes Trial. Evolution was a bad idea in the most literal sense of that word.

And, although the rhetoric is less explicitly Christian today, the concerns are the same. Philip Johnson's influential polemic *Reason in the Balance* is an assault on the same philosophy that Tennesseans perceived in turn-of-the-century Germany. Subtitled *The Case Against Naturalism in Law, Science, and Education*, Johnson's book and similar ones by other contemporary leaders of the anti-evolution crusade, make it clear that the concern is not about a scientific theory that may or may not be true, but rather about a society and its foundations. The assault on evolution is intended to topple the naturalism that rests on it.

"The culturally important element in the Darwinian theory," writes Johnson, "is not the claim that there was some process of ancestral descent in biology, nor is it the claim that biological creation was a gradual and lengthy process rather than the single week described literally in Genesis. The important claim is the one that substitutes a purposeless material process for the Creator."⁵

The scientific community has, for over a century, responded to these concerns with a condescending smugness. Evolution, they assured, was nothing but a scientific theory. It had no larger implications, either religious or social and one should not be so afraid of its introduction into the classroom. It did not cause World War I, and it is not responsible for anything of interest happening to contemporary worldviews. It's just a scientific theory, like gravity.

Such assurances, however, are really little more than disingenuous attempts to win the culture war over who will provide the creation story for America's public schools and all that is entailed by that. Consider, for example, the following concluding summaries of the implications of evolution provided by our leading science popularizers and most respected scientific voices:

Carl Sagan writes in the final paragraph of the 345 page *Cosmos*, on which the major television series was based: “We are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness. . . . Our loyalties are to the species and the planet. We speak for Earth.”⁶ Stephen Jay Gould presents the great mysteries of life thusly, “if you wish to ask the question of the ages—why do humans exist?—a major part of the answer, touching those aspects of the issue that science can treat at all, must be: because *Pikaia* survived the Burgess decimation.”⁷ So what is the place of religion? Edward O. Wilson answered that question in his Pulitzer prize-winning *On Human Nature*: “If religion, including the dogmatic secular ideologies, can be systematically analyzed and explained as a product of the brain's evolution, its power as an external source of morality will be gone forever and the solution of the second dilemma will have become a practical necessity . . . What I am suggesting, in the end, is that the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have.”⁸ In the final three paragraphs of his 614 page *The Ancestor's Tale*, Richard Dawkins makes equally clear his position: “My objection to supernatural beliefs is precisely that they miserably fail to do justice to the sublime grandeur of the real world. They represent a narrowing-down from reality, an impoverishment of what the real world has to offer.”⁹

These quasi-religious sentiments are not uncommon and such examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely: those scientists who think—or at least write—about the significance of evolution see it as much more than a scientific theory like gravity. Evolution (and by extension, the Big Bang theory of cosmic origins), through the eyes of William Jennings Bryan and Phillip Johnson, who opposed it, and through the eyes of the science popularizers just quoted who embrace it, is a theory with substantial cultural implications. It is not now, and has never been, a theory like gravity.

The debates outlined by Israel in *Before Scopes* are not only still going on, but they *need* to be going on. Concerned parents who pay taxes to run public schools to which they send their children need to pay attention to what is being taught in those schools and how it will affect their children. If the Tennesseans of yesteryear were uneasy about sending their children to public schools, the Tennesseans of today feel the same way, as they pull their children out of those schools and educate them at home, or in private schools. But the problem is much larger than Tennessee. Indeed, even in Massachusetts private and home schooling is on the rise.

Moreover, the Scopes Trial, and its successors, are not merely unfortunate episodes in America's long search for a creation story, to be dismissed as aberrations. (Israel's book ably recounts the deep roots of the struggle in Tennessee.) These conflicts are windows into a profound and troubling concern that something important is lost when human beings begin to think of themselves as animals.

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1. Quoted in, Charles A. Israel, *Before Scopes: Evangelicalism, Education, and Evolution in Tennessee, 1879-1925* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 136.

2. *Ibid.*, 26.

3. William Jennings Bryan, *In His Image* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), 88.

4. *Ibid.*, 92.

5. Philip Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Law, Science, and Education* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 14.

6. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 345.

7. Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1990), 323.

8. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 201.

9. Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 613-4. See also, Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, updated and expanded tenth anniversary edition (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 19; and Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes. A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe*, updated edition (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 154-5.

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