

WORLDS APART

THE UNHOLY WAR
BETWEEN
RELIGION AND SCIENCE

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KJV—King James Version

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Evolution: Biological Theory or "Long War Against God"?

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*In the beginning God created the heavens and
the earth.*

Gen. 1:1

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John Washington Butler was a farmer from rural Tennessee. He taught school part time and was the clerk of the RoundLick Association of Primitive Baptists. Like all the fundamentalist Christians of his day, he believed in the literal truth of the Bible, and he was fed up with the educational system that was teaching the young people of Tennessee about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, saying that "man has descended from a lower order of animals."

John Washington Butler was also a state representative in the Tennessee Legislature and in a good position to do something about this problem. So he wrote the following bill, which eventually became the law of the land in Tennessee: "That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."¹

1. John T. Scopes and James Presley, *Center of the Storm* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 52.

On January 28, 1925, the bill passed by an overwhelming margin of 71 to 5. Six weeks later, the bill passed the senate by a margin of 24 to 6, and on March 21, 1925, Governor Austin Peay signed it. It was now illegal to teach Tennessee schoolchildren any theory of origins that differed from that described in Genesis.

The American Civil Liberties Union, self-appointed watchdog of the Constitution,² decided they didn't like the antievolution law Tennessee had passed. They felt it violated the constitutional separation of church and state by requiring the public schools to teach what they felt was essentially a religious doctrine. So about a month after the law went into effect, the group started running an advertisement in the *Chattanooga News*, trying to find a guinea pig who was willing to break the law of Tennessee by teaching the theory of evolution. They offered to pay the legal expenses of this criminal who, presumably in the name of open-mindedness or science or some such high calling, would confess to committing the crime of teaching evolution to Tennessee schoolchildren.

Everyone knew the proposed legal confrontation would be a big show, with big shots playing the major parts. Probably the famous William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential candidate and one of the country's greatest orators, would defend the constitutionality of the law. And the ACLU would certainly recruit some big guns to fight on their side.

The Chamber of Commerce of tiny Dayton, Tenn., decided it would be good for business to have the big contest in their town. So they asked one of the few genuine liberals in the town, a local physical education teacher, if he would be willing to play the star role in the show they were putting together. The teacher was not sure that he had ever taught evolution, but he had filled in once for a biology teacher and had helped some stu-

2. It is very curious and worth noting that the ACLU recently defended a scientific creationist who was dismissed from the staff of *Scientific American* magazine for his views on origins. His creationism in no way interfered with the objective discharge of his responsibilities at the magazine, but he was let go simply because *Scientific American* did not want any of their readers to know they had a creationist on their staff. It is the opinion of the ACLU that *Scientific American* violated their former staff writer's constitutional right to believe as he saw fit. This incident helps put the ACLU in perspective. Politics makes strange bedfellows.

dents review from a textbook, *Civic Biology*, that did contain the theory of evolution. As it turned out, that was close enough—and John Scopes was arrested for teaching a theory of origins that was in disagreement with the literal teachings of the Book of Genesis.

John Scopes stood trial and was defended by the famous agnostic lawyer Clarence Darrow. As expected, William Jennings Bryan was the prosecuting attorney. The press descended on Dayton like flies on a piece of meat; all America was treated to a play-by-play description of one of the most famous intellectual contests in history. The *Courier Journal* of Louisville, Ky., ran a headline on July 21, 1925, which read "3,000 AT TRIAL, GET THRILL." The "Monkey Trial," as it became known, was billed as a really big show, and it did not disappoint. The prosecution won the case, although the verdict was not of particular interest (Darrow, the defense attorney, had even asked the jury, all of whom were farmers, to return a guilty verdict so he could appeal to a higher court.) Scopes, who sat silent for the entire show and was never even called to testify, was found guilty and fined \$100.

Tiny Dayton had pulled itself by its bootstraps onto the pages of history. The famous Monkey Trial courtroom still draws tourists, and William Jennings Bryan College, established to "defend the faith" of its famous namesake, sits on a hill overlooking the tranquillity of a small Tennessee town that had enough excitement in 1925 to last it a lifetime.

Bryan College sent John Scopes a catalog every year for three decades but eventually gave up on him.