

READING: Trial of Monkeys



Jesus said, “*Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” Think about that quote for a minute.

Now here’s another one, this from Thomas Jefferson, who helped separate church and state in the United States when he wrote *Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself.* Separating church and state means that government can’t pick a belief for you, make you go to church, or make you pay taxes to support a certain church. Put Jefferson’s words in your head and then take yourself to the town of Dayton, Tennessee (population 1,600). It is 1925.

Mule-drawn wagons and old Model Ts are rolling down the dusty roads into Dayton. Hot-dog and soft-drink vendors seem to be on every street corner. More than 100 reporters have arrived in town. So have photographers and motion-picture makers. A telegraph office- with 22 operators- is set up in a grocery store. A bookseller hawks biology texts. Another sells Bibles. Everywhere there are monkeys: monkey postcards, stuffed toy monkeys, and souvenir buttons that say *Your Old Man is a monkey.* Dayton has never seen so many people.

What’s going on?

It’s a sensational court case; the best-known trial of the decade. Newspaper headlines are calling it the “monkey trial,” and readers and radio listeners all over the country (and in other countries, too) can’t seem to get enough of it.

A young schoolteacher is on trial because of what he is teaching in his classroom. Actually, it is modern science that is on trial, and separation of church and state. In Tennessee it is illegal to teach the science of evolution. Evolution traces life on earth through millions of years of development from simple one-celled creatures to increasingly complex plants and animals to humans. (Since apes and monkeys are a stage below us on the evolutionary ladder, jokesters have come up with the monkey label for the trial.)

Most fundamentalist Christians have a problem with evolution. They believe in the exact words of the Bible, and the Bible says that the world was created in six days and that Adam and Eve- humans- were part of the Creation from the very beginning. This is a disturbing issue, and very serious to many people. Can you be both a Christian and a believer in evolution? Most Christians (but not fundamentalists) say you can. The theory of evolution is accepted as fact at all of our major universities.

The Verdict



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But, in 1925, Tennessee fundamentalist Christians have gotten a law passed that says it is unlawful for any teacher...*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.*

Now that state law is telling citizens what they should believe. The doctrine of a church is being imposed on public schools. The doctrine of a church is being imposed on public schools. It is the opposite of separation of church and state. The First Amendment to the Constitution protects that separation when it says, ***Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*** Because of the new law, Tennessee's citizens are no longer free to study evolution in public schools. (Private schools may teach as they wish.)

Many schoolteachers ignore the law and keep teaching what is in their textbooks and what most believe in- evolutionary science. But the **American Civil Liberties Union** believes the law is unconstitutional. The ACLU, a private organization, was founded in 1920 to protect civil rights in America. The ACLU says it will pay the legal expenses of anyone who wants to test the Tennessee law. In Dayton, some citizens sitting around in Robinson's drugstore decide to test the law. They ask 24-year-old **John Scopes** if he would mind being arrested- Scopes teaches evolution in high school. They joke that a trial might put Dayton on the map. It turns out to be no joke.



When **William Jennings Bryan**(*right*) learns of the trial, he volunteers to be the prosecutor (in favor of the Tennessee law). Bryan has run for president three times; everyone knows him. He is kind, well-liked, and a fundamentalist. **Clarence Darrow**(*left*)volunteers to defend Scopes. Darrow is a brilliant lawyer, a friend of the underdog, and an **agnostic** (someone who is not sure if there is a God or not).

When the trial begins, it is hot, and the old courthouse is so crowded it acts as if it might collapse; the judge moves everyone outdoors. Darrow is in shirtsleeves and wears lavender suspenders to hold up his pants. Bryan turns his collar inside his shirt, ties a handkerchief around his neck,

and cools himself with a palm-leaf fan.

Bryan accuses Darrow of wanting to “slur the Bible.”

Darrow says he wants “to prevent bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the educational system of the United States.” Darrow puts Bryan on the stand (that usually isn't done to the other lawyer), and asks questions that Bryan admits he hasn't thought much about. When Darrow forces Bryan to say that six days might not be actual six days, Bryan's fundamentalist friends are aghast. The great Populist orator is made to look foolish. (He dies in his sleep five days after the trial ends.)

It is an angry trial, full of bad feelings, and it doesn't settle much of anything. Bryan does win the case: the local court and the state supreme court agree that Scopes broke the law. (Because of a technicality, the case cannot be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court; the law stays on the books until 1967.) But, in most of the nation, people laugh about monkeys and don't take it seriously. Which is too bad. It is an issue that will keep popping up. In the 1980s, Arkansas and Louisiana pass laws that say that public schools teaching evolution must use “equal time” to teach creationism (the Bible's story of Creation). In 1987, the Supreme Court finds those laws in conflict with the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom.