

Social Tensions

Religion

While some Americans were concerned with the increasing immigration into the United States; others feared modernism and new ideas might usurp the authority of the church. For many of the millions of people who lived in rural areas, towns, and small cities around the country, it was not the great urban migration that was a problem, it was that urban culture itself seemed to be wicked, materialistic, and detrimental to moral character.

As Americans abandoned the country in droves and moved to large cities, new ideas emerged among these urban transplants as the influence of modernism was taking hold. More than ever before, education was a priority in Americans' lives. Many states started to require students to attend school until the age of sixteen or eighteen. A professor from Columbia University, John Dewey, founded the progressive educational movement by promoting the principles of "learning by doing." Dewey's idea stated that teachers should educate students on traditional subjects as well as more practical life-skill topics.

Along with the changes in education, Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution and Karl Marx's suggestion that individuals were primarily motivated by economic motives became key points in shaping the progressive mindset. Modernist Christians, who mostly lived in large cities, attempted to connect new scientific advances with religion. They believed that science and religion could not only coexist, each could support the other's tenants and principles.

It was Darwin's contribution to Biology that religious fundamentalists despised most. They rejected the theory of evolution and hoped to eliminate all mention of the scientific advances made during the last century regarding the origins of the universe and the history of humankind. Fundamentalists believed that these new ideas minimized the importance of the Bible and contributed to the moral breakdown of young people.

To appease fundamentalists, three southern states, including Tennessee, adopted laws prohibiting the teaching of "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible." The American Civil Liberties Union announced that it would finance a challenge to the constitutionality of the law if a teacher would knowingly violate it. Friends convinced John T. Scopes, a well-liked Biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, to teach evolution in his classroom, and he was immediately arrested. Lawyers from around the country came forward to defend him, and the stage was set for a sensationalistic event that would put progressive education on trial. The case, often referred to as the "Monkey Trial," began on July 13, 1925.

The State of Tennessee retained the services of Williams Jennings Bryan to prosecute Scopes. Bryan, a well-known Presbyterian fundamentalist and an accomplished speaker, had helped to popularize the fundamentalist movement. Bryan had begun to campaign against the teaching of evolution as early as 1921. Clarence Darrow, a trial lawyer from Chicago and self-described agnostic, volunteered to defend Scopes.

Reporters from large cities camped in the small Tennessee town reporting on the trial's spectacle. Spectators drawn by curiosity and publicity seekers captivated by the media-hype also crowded the streets of Dayton. The trial itself did not disappoint the public in terms of drama. Darrow even insinuated that the magnitude of the trial went well beyond the legal issue when he argued, "Scopes isn't on trial, civilization is on trial ... no man's belief will be safe if they win."

The judge presiding over the trial ruled that scientific testimony would not be allowed. Faced with this limitation, Darrow decided to try to attack the state's position, and he asked if Bryan would take the stand as an expert of the Bible. Bryan agreed and what followed was a bitter exchange between Darrow and Bryan that ended in a quick adjournment of the court when the two charged at one another, fists raised. Darrow's strategy was to point out Bryan's literal beliefs in the text of the Bible, including that a "great fish" swallowed Jonah, that Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs, and that Joshua had stopped the movement of the sun. Darrow's intention was to make Bryan appear irrational; a tactic that many reporters and spectators considered successful.

Ultimately, the court ruled that the real issue was whether or not Scopes taught evolution in his classroom. According to the court, Scopes had purposely violated the law and was fined \$100; though the state Supreme Court later overturned the fine on a technicality. Bryan died of a stroke five days after the trial ended, and his death was attributed to the stress of his testimony and the July courtroom heat.