

At its Core, the Scopes Trial Was About Racism

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The now-infamous Scopes ‘Evolution’ Trial took place in Dayton, Tennessee, to challenge the law that prohibited teaching human evolution as fact in public schools. The trial occurred in the summer of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. Apart from Jesus’s trial before Pilate, the Scopes ‘Monkey Trial’ is probably the best-known legal confrontation in history. The law was supported by famous Christian attorney William Jennings Bryan and opposed by the famous agnostic ACLU attorney Clarence Darrow.

The universal claim is that the trial was about science vs religion. In fact, from William Jennings Bryan’s perspective, racism was at the center of the Scopes Trial, not religion. In contrast, Clarence Darrow made it very clear that it was his goal to make the trial about religion, specifically Christianity. He did this especially towards the end of the trial when he put Brian on the stand and questioned him about Bible miracles such as Jonah and the whale.

In contrast, Bryan had the facts on his side. The textbook by George W. Hunter titled *A Civic Biology* (1914) used to teach evolution in the town where Scopes was a teacher, was openly racist. It taught Blacks were an inferior race and Whites were the superior race. This text was mandated by the state of Tennessee and many other states. Given these facts, why did Bryan largely ignore the race issue at the trial?

The fact is, Bryan made it clear that he was very concerned about equal rights for Blacks. In his magazine, *The Commoner*, Bryan frequently wrote about his concern in this area. For example, in 1902, he wrote that about *"the legal rights of the black man... there can be no question. The negro is a citizen, and as a citizen is entitled to all of the guarantees of the federal and state constitutions. He has freedom to speak and to write; freedom of conscience and the right 'to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'* In these respects there is no distinction between him and the white man." Bryan added that in the Southern states, Blacks also had *"the guarantees enumerated in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights."*

In the area of education, Bryan believed that *"the negro is entitled to all of the opportunities offered to the white man. The Negro must be educated; no community can afford to permit any portion of its population to remain ignorant or to become imbruted. The whites, for their own as well as the good of the negroes, must see to it that the free school is open to every child, white and black."* Bryan added in a report of the Black's educational progress, noting that from 1826 to 1899, 2,331 Blacks graduated from college.

Bryan did not stress the civil rights issue in the Scopes trial for good reasons. These quotes were published by Bryan in 1902, and the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional only in 1954, 52 years later. In many Southern states this equality ideal was largely ignored, or even challenged by Jim Crow laws, for over a century. Those who pushed "Jim Crow" laws wanted to prevent the full integration of people judged "unfit" and "inferior," or of "inferior racial stock." They rationalized their agenda on the grounds that Blacks were biologically inferior. Bryan knew this and this is why he focused on the right to teach the Bible's view as taught in Genesis, which is all men and women are equal in the eyes of God because we are all decedents of our first parents, Adam and Eve, not the racist view taught in the *Civic Biology* textbook.

The civil rights as reality began to change in the South only in 1963 when the federal court ordered the school board in Macon County, Alabama, to begin integration of Blacks. The violent riots and mayhem that ensued from this order lasted for years. As late as 2015, Macon-East Academy's student body of 277 was 97 percent white and less than 3 percent African-American. Bryan knew full well that if he presented his views (as was written in 1902) in the Scopes court trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, he would have incurred the wrath of many in that state and would have been far less likely to prevail in the Scopes case.

Creation was part of Bryan's conclusion about racial equality, writing that "Every race is capable of self-government—it would be an insult to the Creator to assume that He brought into existence a race of people incapable of self-government." Some of the words of Bryan even remind me of those uttered by Martin Luther King, Jr.

One example is W.J. Bryan's opining that "A man is to be praised or blamed according to the use he makes of his talents or opportunities, not by his inherited advantages [or skin color]" (The Commoner, 1903. Vol. 3, p. 251).

The significance of the Scopes Trial for today is, instead of terminating teachers being fired for teaching human evolution as fact, today one can be terminated for teaching facts against evolution as happened to the Harvard-trained, Chinese biochemistry professor that I reported on earlier in this column. I have now documented over 200 cases of highly qualified professors terminated for just that very reason.

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