

The Scopes Monkey Trial and the evolution of fundamentalism

A staged legal proceeding in a small town became the catalyst for a century of culture wars.

by [Michael A. Smith](#) in the [July 2025](#) issue

Published on July 7, 2025



Proceedings during the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, were moved outside due to large crowds and intense summer heat. (Bettmann Archive / Getty)

On July 10, 1925, the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, became the unlikely epicenter of a clash that reverberated through US history for a century. The trial of John T. Scopes, a young high school teacher charged with violating Tennessee's Butler Act by teaching the theory of evolution, transcended its immediate legal

context to become what historian Edward J. Larson has described as a watershed in American cultural history. As we mark the centenary of this landmark moment, examining both the events leading up to the Scopes Monkey Trial and its aftermath can help us understand how a staged legal proceeding in a small town became the catalyst for a century of culture wars that continue to shape US public life.

The trial is often remembered as a straightforward confrontation between science and religion. In fact it was a complex intersection of theological disputes, cultural anxieties, media transformation, and economic opportunism. What began in the 19th century as a theological debate among Protestant intellectuals would help establish the foundation for the modern religious right and what scholars now recognize as Christian nationalism.

To understand the impact of the Scopes trial, we must consider the theological disputes that gave birth to fundamentalism as a distinct religious movement within American Protestantism. The roots of this movement extend back to Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-19th century, where theologians developed what became known as Princeton theology.

Princeton theology, articulated by figures like Charles Hodge, his son A. A. Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield, emerged as a response to the growing influence of higher biblical criticism imported from Germany, which applied historical and literary analysis to scriptural texts. The Princeton theologians advocated for biblical inerrancy, including in matters of science and history. Charles Hodge's systematic theology established the foundations for this position, articulating a view of scripture as divinely inspired and factually accurate across all domains. Historian George Marsden identifies this period as crucial in establishing the intellectual framework that would later define fundamentalist approaches to scripture.

By the late 19th century, these theological disputes had intensified as evolutionary theory gained prominence and scientific acceptance following Charles Darwin's 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. The emerging sciences of geology and paleontology posed additional challenges to literal interpretations of biblical creation narratives. In this context, conservative theologians began organizing to defend orthodox Christianity against modernist influences.

Between 1910 and 1915, the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a series of essays funded by California oil millionaires Lyman and Milton Stewart, marked a key

moment in the development of fundamentalism as a self-conscious movement. These essays, distributed free to pastors, missionaries, and religious workers across America, articulated the core doctrines that fundamentalists considered non-negotiable, including biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the historical reality of Christ's miracles.

As historian Randall Balmer notes, this early fundamentalism was primarily concerned with theological issues, not political ones. The movement initially focused on maintaining theological orthodoxy within denominations and educational institutions, not on influencing public policy.

This theological battle would soon spill into the public sphere, however, as fundamentalists grew increasingly concerned about the teaching of evolution in public schools. By the early 1920s, their focus had expanded beyond denominational politics to education policy. William Jennings Bryan, a three-time Democratic presidential nominee and former Secretary of State, emerged as a leading voice against evolutionary teaching, arguing that it undermined religious faith and promoted materialistic views that he associated with German militarism in World War I.

Bryan's entrance into the evolution controversy marked a shift, bringing fundamentalist concerns from seminary classrooms and denominational meetings into public policy debates. His advocacy helped inspire anti-evolution legislation in several states, including the Butler Act in Tennessee, which would become the legal basis for the Scopes trial.

The Butler Act, enacted in March 1925, prohibited teaching that humans descended from a lower order of animals and "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible." However, the trial would never have occurred without a remarkable confluence of opportunistic interests.

Shortly after the Butler Act's passage, the American Civil Liberties Union advertised in Tennessee newspapers that it would defend any teacher willing to challenge the law. The ad caught the attention of a group of Dayton businessmen, led by George Rappleyea, who saw an opportunity to put their struggling town on the map. As Edward Larson documents in his Pulitzer Prize-winning account *Summer for the Gods*, these men convinced Scopes, a 24-year-old general science teacher and

football coach who occasionally substituted for the biology teacher, to serve as the test case.

Scopes later remarked that he was not sure he had actually ever taught evolution. Nevertheless, he agreed to stand as a defendant, and Rappleyea swore out the warrant for Scopes's arrest on May 5.

The manufactured nature of the case was no secret. Historian Jeffrey P. Moran notes that everyone involved understood from the beginning that the case was a put-up job, a friendly test case designed to challenge the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Dayton's business leaders hoped the trial would bring publicity and economic benefits to their town, which had suffered economic decline. In this sense, the Scopes trial was an early example of what would now be considered a media event aimed at economic development.

The strategy worked beyond their wildest expectations: two famous figures agreed to participate. Clarence Darrow, the most prominent criminal defense attorney in the United States, volunteered to join the defense team, while Bryan, known as the "Great Commoner," joined the prosecution. Their involvement transformed what might have been a minor legal proceeding into what journalist H. L. Mencken dubbed "the monkey trial"—a national sensation and the first trial to be broadcast live on the radio.

The trial's timing coincided with the rise of mass media. Radio was still a relatively new medium. National newspaper chains were expanding, and news services could quickly transmit stories nationwide. As historian Michael Kazin writes, "the Scopes trial was a made-for-media event before such a concept existed." More than 200 newspaper reporters descended on Dayton, a town of approximately 1,800 residents. Western Union installed additional telegraph lines to handle the estimated 165,000 words being transmitted daily from the courthouse.

When the trial began on July 10, presiding judge John T. Raulston quickly narrowed its scope by ruling that scientific testimony about evolution would not be permitted. The defense had assembled an impressive array of scientific experts, including zoologist Maynard Metcalf and geologist Kirtley Mather, but they were not allowed to testify before the jury. As Larson notes, "Raulston's ruling transformed the trial from a test of the Butler Act's constitutionality to a more fundamental debate about the relationship between science and religion."

The defining moment of the trial came on its seventh day, when the defense called Bryan himself to the stand as an expert on the Bible. In an extraordinary exchange, Darrow questioned Bryan about his literal interpretation of scripture, pressing him on everything from the age of the earth to whether Jonah could have survived in the belly of a whale. The confrontation, conducted on the courthouse lawn because the judge feared the courtroom floor might collapse under the weight of the crowd, revealed the tensions within Bryan's thinking.

Though Bryan maintained his belief in the inerrancy of scripture, Darrow forced him to acknowledge that specific biblical passages might require interpretation rather than literal reading. When asked about the six days of creation, Bryan eventually conceded, "I think it would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the earth in six days as in six years or 6 million years, or 600 million years. I do not think it important whether we believe one or the other."

This apparent concession became the focus of much media coverage. Mencken, whose scathing reports in *The Baltimore Sun* shaped national perceptions of the trial, portrayed Bryan as intellectually defeated. Mencken's characterization of the local population as "yokels" and "morons" and his description of fundamentalism as "graveyard theology" exemplified the contemptuous attitude much of the national press held toward rural religious conservatives.

On July 21, the jury deliberated for just nine minutes before finding Scopes guilty. But Raulston fined him just \$100, the minimum penalty under the law. The Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the conviction on a technicality—the jury should have set the fine, not the judge—but the court upheld the constitutionality of the Butler Act itself.

Five days after the trial ended, Bryan died in his sleep in Dayton. His sudden death added a dramatic coda to the proceedings. According to historian Michael Lienesch, it contributed to the trial's mythic status as a symbolic battle between competing visions of America.

In the immediate aftermath of the trial, a powerful narrative emerged in the national press: Scopes's conviction aside, it was fundamentalism that had been intellectually defeated and publicly humiliated. This narrative, shaped mainly by journalists like Mencken and subsequently reinforced by popular cultural representations like the 1955 play and 1960 film *Inherit the Wind*, portrayed the trial as a decisive victory for

modernity over religious obscurantism.

Frederick Lewis Allen, writing in 1931, captured this conventional wisdom when he claimed the trial “exposed the fundamental contradictions in the fundamentalist position” and suggested that after Dayton, legislators ceased to pass anti-evolution laws. Fundamentalism was still there but it had been humiliated and laughed at, and the magic had gone out of its slogans.

This narrative of fundamentalist defeat proved premature. As historian Joel Carpenter has demonstrated in his groundbreaking study *Revive Us Again*, fundamentalism did not disappear after Dayton but rather retreated from the national spotlight to build its institutional infrastructure. Rather than representing fundamentalism’s demise, the Scopes trial catalyzed its transformation.

Stung by their portrayal in the national media and increasingly convinced that mainstream institutions—including public schools, universities, and Christian denominations—were hostile to their beliefs, fundamentalists began building parallel institutions. The aftermath of the Scopes trial saw the establishment or expansion of Bible institutes, Christian colleges, publishing houses, radio ministries, and mission boards independent of mainstream denominations and institutions. This institutional development represented what Marsden has called “the establishment of a fundamentalist subculture.” Rather than engaging directly with mainstream culture, fundamentalists created alternative spaces where their beliefs could be taught, practiced, and transmitted to the next generation.

However, this retreat from mainstream engagement would prove temporary. The Scopes trial marked a crucial turning point in how religious conservatives understood their relationship to American public life. The perceived humiliation at Dayton contributed to a narrative of cultural displacement that would, decades later, help mobilize the religious right as a political force. The institutions established in response to that humiliation provided the organizational infrastructure for later evangelical political engagement, on issues ranging from desegregation to school prayer to abortion.

By the time Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979, he and others were explicitly linking theological conservatism with political conservatism. Falwell, trained at Baptist Bible College, represented a direct lineage from the fundamentalist educational institutions established after the Scopes trial to the

political activism of the late 20th century. As Balmer documents, the founders of the religious right frequently invoked the Scopes trial as a formative moment in their movement's history—a time when Christians had been mocked and marginalized for standing up for biblical truth. However simplified and mythologized this historical memory was, it motivated political engagement.

The creation science movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, led by figures like Henry Morris, with his influential book *The Genesis Flood*, directly responded to the issues raised at the Scopes trial. Rather than simply opposing the teaching of evolution, this movement sought to develop alternative scientific explanations aligned with literal readings of Genesis. This approach reflected evangelical Christians' increased educational and professional status: they now had the credentials to engage scientific questions on their own terms.

The Butler Act was repealed in 1967. But legal battles over creation science continued, culminating in the Supreme Court's *Edwards v. Aguillard* decision in 1987, which ruled that teaching creation science in public schools violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. This echoed the constitutional questions first raised at Dayton, and these controversies would continue into the 21st century with debates over intelligent design and the appropriate place of evolutionary theory in science education.

The line from the Scopes trial to contemporary Christian nationalism reveals continuities and transformations. The fundamentalism that emerged from Dayton was primarily concerned with theological orthodoxy and cultural separation rather than political power. Contemporary Christian nationalism, by contrast, explicitly seeks to align national identity with a particular understanding of Christianity and to use political power to advance that vision.

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry define Christian nationalism as a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life such that Christianity is a defining aspect of American identity and public life. While not all religious conservatives embrace this framework, its influence extends beyond explicitly religious contexts to shape broader political discourse about American identity and purpose.

The institutions established after the Scopes trial—Bible colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, and media networks—have proven instrumental in disseminating

and legitimizing Christian nationalist ideas. As historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues, the “parallel information ecosystem” developed by evangelicals since the 1920s has created communities largely insulated from mainstream scientific and academic consensus. This institutional separation has contributed to persistent skepticism toward scientific consensus among many religious conservatives, on issues ranging from evolution to climate change. According to sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund, “the Scopes Trial established a template for science-religion conflict that continues to shape public discourse, even as the specific issues have evolved.”

Contemporary controversies over pandemic responses, climate science, and sex education reflect the enduring impact of the science-religion divide symbolized by the Scopes trial. As historian Adam Laats observes, when we see school board battles over curriculum today, we are witnessing the latest chapter in a conflict that broke into public view at Dayton.

The relationship between fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and Christian nationalism remains complex and contested. Not all evangelicals embrace Christian nationalist ideas, and significant theological and political diversity exists within conservative Protestantism. Nevertheless, the institutional and ideological connections between the movement that emerged from Dayton and contemporary religious conservatism are substantial.

What happened in Dayton a century ago continues to reverberate through American religious, educational, and political life in ways that the trial’s participants could scarcely have imagined. The trial’s legacy is multifaceted and paradoxical. While typically remembered as a defeat for fundamentalism, it catalyzed the movement’s institutional development and eventual political resurgence. Though framed as a decisive confrontation between science and religion, it instead inaugurated a century of evolving negotiations and conflicts between these domains. While often portrayed as a simple morality tale of progress triumphing over tradition, its legacy reveals the persistent complexity of American attitudes toward scientific knowledge and religious faith.

We continue to grapple with the questions the trial raised: about the relationship between majority rule and minority rights, between scientific expertise and religious conviction, and about whose vision of America should shape public institutions and policies. These questions have no simple resolution, which is perhaps why the trial continues to fascinate and provoke.

As we reflect on this centenary, we would do well to move beyond simplistic narratives about the trial and its aftermath. Neither the triumphalist account of science vanquishing superstition nor the reactionary portrayal of faithful believers defending tradition against godless modernism captures the complex reality of what happened at Dayton. The legacy of the Scopes trial lies not in the victory of one worldview over another but in the ongoing, often contentious, conversation about science, faith, education, and national identity we're still engaging today.