

Professor Volney Gay
Director, Center for the Study of Religion and Culture
Vanderbilt University
Op Ed piece
10/2/2005

80 Years after the Monkey Trial: Why It Still Matters

Eighty years ago, in Dayton, TN, the “Monkey Trial” of John Scopes came to an end. Scopes, a high-school teacher, was fined \$100 and the Tennessee law that prohibited teaching Darwinian thought was upheld, repealed only in 1967. Sometimes called the trial of the century, it pitted William Jennings Bryan, a leader in progressive politics, against Clarence Darrow, the ACLU, and friends of progressive science. Nashville’s leading institutions, including Vanderbilt, Fisk, the *Tennessean* and the *Banner* all played roles in the national drama.

Why does the Scopes trial still matter? Politically, controversies over so-called “Intelligent Design,” a cousin to Creationism—with newly organized efforts to control high-school textbooks in many states—are rekindled across the United States. Having created a controversy, advocates of “Intelligent Design” now urge schools to teach the controversy (as President Bush put it) as if it were a scientific issue. The majority of scientists sees this as sleight of hand and refuse to take part. No science offers perfect explanations and Darwinian thought has triumphed in numerous areas of biology and natural science.

Is the controversy, therefore, a matter of fools holding back the progress of science? No, for the core issue of the Scopes trial is religious. The “anti-evolutionists” who prosecuted Scopes and the advocates for “Intelligent Design” do not debate the rise of plants and animals. Rather, the battle is over the theological struggle of how to understand being human.

The notion of human being is tied inextricably to the notion of God (or the gods). In every instance of religious reflection, we find the same question: what is human being? How did we, with our almost infinite capacities for thought, change, and domination come to be? Imbued with powers far beyond any other animal, humans are too faulty to be considered gods themselves. Yet, the idea of God (or the gods) appears in all distinctive human cultures: it names the other pole of human— it designates a being who realizes perfectly our imperfectly realized nature.

Welded together and inseparable, the idea of god and the idea of human being provoke questions answered by narratives. These tell us who we are, what we should do, and what we may hope for at the end of our lives and at the end of human history. For

Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the Genesis narratives about the origins of humans provide a way to judge all competing accounts. When Darwinists challenged the naïve world views imbedded in Genesis, numerous persons found themselves terrified that the ethical core of civilization was under attack. These were not foolish concerns.

By 1935, 35 states had enacted laws using "eugenic" theory. Persons deemed mentally ill, retarded, habitual criminals and epileptics were castrated. In *Summer for the Gods*, an account of the Scopes trial, Edward Larson cites George Hunter, a leading biology textbook author, who wrote: "If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading." However, "Humanity will not allow this, but we do have the remedy of separating the sexes in asylums or other places and in various ways preventing intermarriage and the possibility of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race" (Harvard, 1997, p. 27). Nazi authorities, who cited American eugenic legislation, took the murder option when they assumed power in Germany in 1933.

William Jennings Bryan, the progressive politician savaged in the play and movie "Inherit the Wind," argued against eugenics and linked that theory to Darwinism. Ignorant of how science works, Bryan aligned himself with the repression of scientific theory. Yet, his complaint—that the Genesis account was under attack—is valid. By linking human being to God, Genesis establishes humans as unique among all the animals. When Adam names the animals, he assumes dominion and superiority: one might say this is arrogance, yet it preserves a categorical difference between humans and all others.

This, in turn, preserves human beings as sacred in themselves. They take on a dignity and stature which transcends all ordinary reasoning about means and ends. The burden of depriving a person of this inherent dignity rests on the state; it must show why this person should die, or that person should not reproduce.

Debates over the status of African Americans, the morality of abortion, the death penalty, the role of religion in the founding of the United States, and our place in the world all turn on the question of human being. We see this in the American-Iraq war begun three years ago. To what degree does the American Bill of Rights correspond to something that is true for all humans and thus for Iraqis? Is there a common human nature, grounded on freedom of the will and a universal ethic—announced in the Koran as well as the Bible—that will emerge in Iraq? A war, with all its terrible consequences, hangs in the balance.

Volney Gay is Chair of Religious Studies and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture at Vanderbilt University.