

THE MONKEY TRIAL: RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS IN THE 1920s

In the 1920s most communities in the American countryside were very religious. Country people prided themselves on being god-fearing, church-going Christians. In the cities, however, church attendance was falling. To try and stop this, a number of **revivalist** groups were formed, groups which aimed to revive interest in the Christian faith.

The revivalists

The best known revivalist of the 1920s was Aimee Semple McPherson. Sister Aimee, as she called herself, was head of the 'Four Square Gospel Alliance'. Her church, the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, held 5000 people for services. Sister Aimee, often dressed as an angel, led the congregation in hymn singing, beating time with a tambourine. Every evening she baptised 150 people in a giant tank of water in the temple. She healed incurably ill people and filled the 'Miracle Room' of the Temple with discarded crutches and wheelchairs. Within five years she had built up a large fortune and was famous throughout the world.



Sister Aimee preaching in the Angelus Temple



Billy Sunday in a typical pose, 1928

Another famous revivalist, Billy Sunday, specialised in preaching hell-fire sermons from the pulpit. Like Sister Aimee, he became a millionaire as a result of collections taken among his audiences.

The fundamentalists

Over half the Christians in America belonged to Protestant churches such as the Baptist and Meth-

odist churches. But Protestants in the 1920s split into two groups which disagreed with each other about the **theory of evolution**, an explanation of the way in which life on earth has developed.

Charles Darwin, in his book *The Origin of Species*, argued that life on earth began many millions of years ago and that it developed slowly into its present form. Human beings, he said, developed gradually from the same origins as other animals. So human beings have the same ancestors as, say, apes. Many people thought Darwin meant that humans evolved from monkeys.

Darwin's theory of evolution caused bitter arguments as soon as it appeared in 1859. The arguments were still raging in rural America at the start of the twentieth century. Many American Protestants thought that the theory was an attack on the Holy Bible. According to the Bible, God created the universe and everything in it in six days. A careful reading of the Bible suggests that this happened in the year 4004 BC.

In 1919 Protestants who believed this biblical explanation of the origins of the world set up 'The World's Christian Fundamentals Association'. The aim of these **fundamentalists** was to make Darwin's theory of evolution illegal.

In 1924 the fundamentalists set up an **Anti-Evolution League**. 'Flying Fundamentalists' toured America making speeches against Darwin. Gradually they began to succeed in their aim. Six states passed laws making it illegal for teachers to teach the theory of evolution.

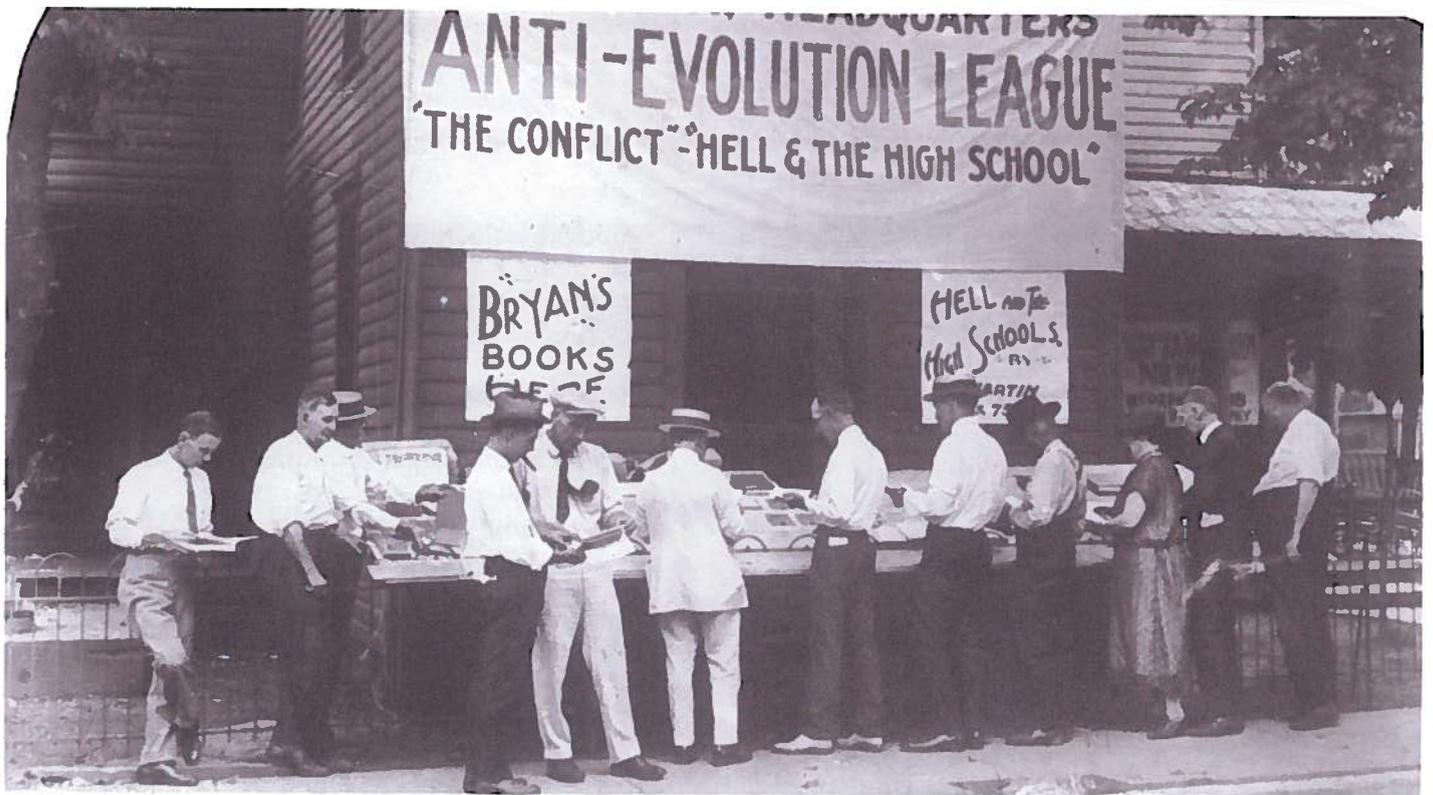
One of the states that passed an anti-evolution law was Tennessee. The Tennessee law stated that:

'It shall be 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.'

Johnny Scopes and the 'Monkey Trial'

As soon as the law was passed, two men in Dayton, a small town in Tennessee, decided to put the law to the test. One of the men was a twenty-four-year-old biology teacher called Johnny Scopes. He agreed to teach the theory of evolution to one of his classes and to let his friend sue him for breaking the law.

Johnny Scopes taught a class the theory of evolution and was promptly arrested. A leading fundamentalist, William Jennings Bryan, was called



A street in Dayton, Tennessee, during the 'Monkey Trial' of Johnny Scopes in July 1925

in to be the prosecutor at Scopes's trial. A lawyer named Clarence Darrow was hired to defend Scopes. Bryan and Darrow were the most famous lawyers in America, and pressmen from all over the world gathered in Dayton to report the trial.

In the 'Monkey Trial', as people called it, Darrow questioned Bryan about his fundamentalist beliefs. He asked him how he thought the world was created. Bryan said that God had created the world in 4004 BC. Darrow asked:

'Do you say you do not believe that there are any civilisations on this earth that reach back beyond five thousand years?'

Bryan replied:

'I am not satisfied by any evidence I have seen.'

Bryan went on to say that Eve was literally created out of Adam's rib, that Noah had survived the flood in an ark in the year 2348 BC, and that the Tower of Babel was the cause of there being so many languages in the world.

The press made fun of Bryan when he said these things, and the judge refused to allow the questioning to continue. The jury then gave its verdict: Scopes was guilty of breaking the anti-evolution law. He was fined \$100.

Work section

A. Test your understanding of this chapter by explaining the following terms: revivalists; theory of evolution; fundamentalists.

SUMMARY .

The 'Monkey Trial'

- In some states it was illegal to teach Darwin's theory of evolution. This led to the 'Monkey Trial' in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925.
- A schoolteacher was prosecuted for teaching evolution in a biology lesson, which was illegal in Tennessee.
- The case became famous all over the world and although the teacher was found guilty, he was only given a £100 dollar fine.
- The decision was overturned on appeal by the Tennessee Supreme Court the following year.

SOURCE G

- Q: [Darrow] Do you think the sun was made on the fourth day?
- A: [Bryan] Yes.
- Q: And they had morning and evening without the sun?
- A: I am simply saying it is a period.
- Q: The creation might have been going on a long time?
- A: It might have continued for millions of years.

An extract from Darrow's cross-examination of Bryan. He is asking about the story of creation in the Bible.

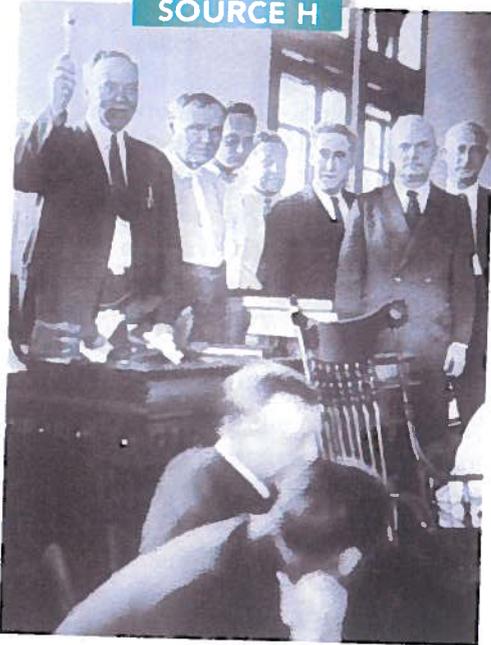
For the Prosecution

William Jennings Bryan, a religious fundamentalist who said that the theory of evolution was wrong.

For the Defence

Clarence Darrow, hired by the American Civil Liberties Union.

SOURCE H



The main people in the 'Monkey Trial' of 1925.

Wide press coverage

Journalists flocked to Tennessee to cover the case. They called it the 'Monkey Trial' because Darwin's theory of evolution said that humans evolved from apes. Darrow knew he could not win the case because Scopes had deliberately broken the law. His aim was to show that the anti-evolution law of 1925 was a threat to freedom of thought and speech.

Darrow called Bryan to give evidence and questioned him about his religious beliefs (Source G). Under this questioning Bryan admitted that he did not believe everything that was written in the Bible. As a result Bryan's credibility was destroyed. Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the religious fundamentalists had been made to look rather silly. The anti-evolution law was never used again and in 1926 the verdict against Scopes was overturned.

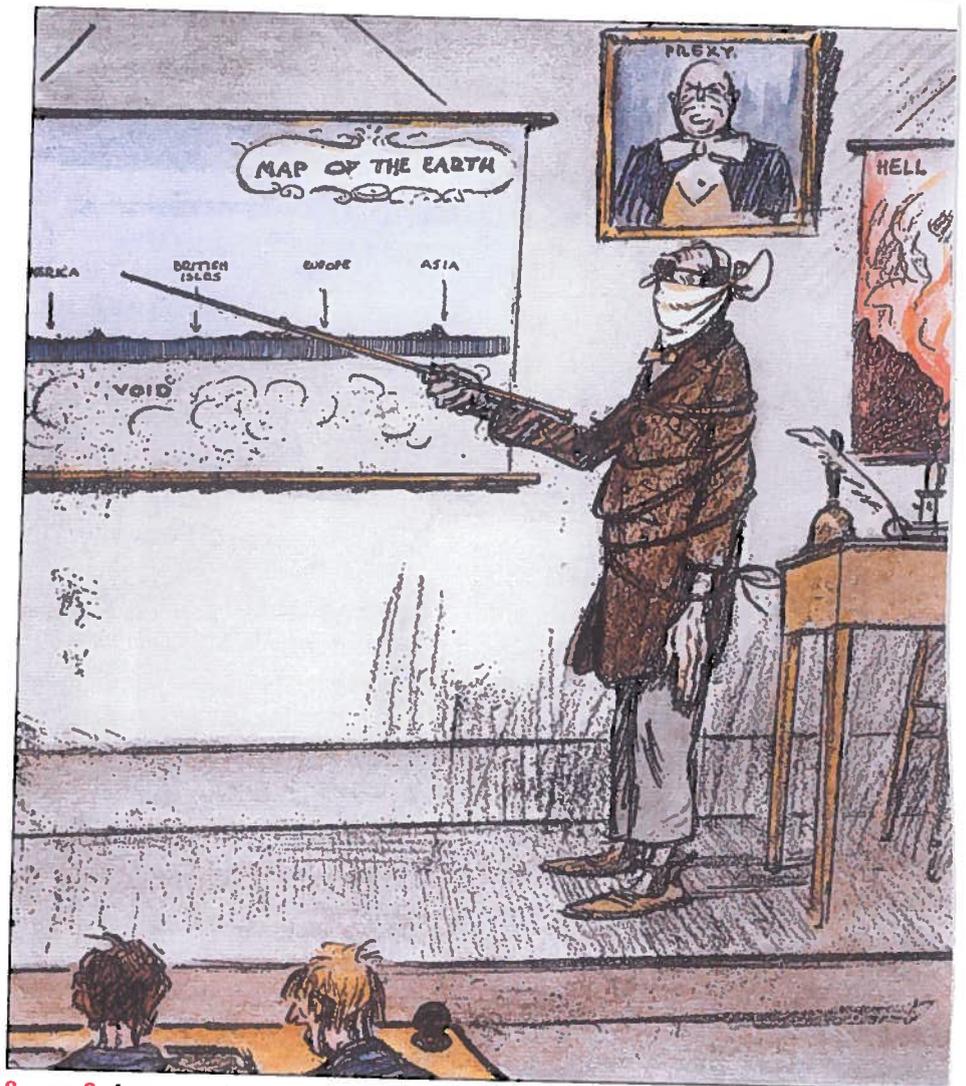
QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did the 'Monkey Trial' come to court?
- 2 Why do you think people in the southern states were opposed to Darwin's ideas?
- 3 Who won the case? (Think carefully.)

The 'Monkey Trial'

Many religious groups rejected the theory of **evolution**. A conservative politician, William Jennings Bryan, campaigned to ban any teaching of evolution in schools. Bryan and his supporters poked fun at the theory of evolution by suggesting it said we were related to monkeys. In 1925, the state of Tennessee passed a law that banned the teaching of anything that contradicted the Bible's Creation story.

John Scopes, a high-school biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, deliberately taught evolution so there would be a court case to test whether the law was allowable under the Constitution. The trial caused a sensation. On the first day about 1,000 people crammed into the courtroom: 300 of them had to stand. The case was broadcast live on radio in Chicago. The defence said the state law was against the Constitution and should be overruled. The judge did not accept this argument. The defence then tried to call witnesses to test the idea of Creation in the Bible and the idea of evolution. The judge heard some evidence, then decided that this was irrelevant. He finally told the jury that the decision was simple. Was teaching against the Creation story illegal? Yes. Had Scopes done this? Yes. So he had broken the law. The jury found Scopes guilty and fined him \$100. Despite appeals against the case, the Tennessee law was not repealed until 1967.



Source C: A cartoon about the Scopes trial, published in a New York newspaper at the time.

Activities

- Write a sentence each to explain how radio ownership might:
 - broaden the mind
 - encourage immorality.
- Write a short opening speech for a debate on 'The motor car encourages immorality'. Choose either to support OR oppose the motion.
- How far does Source B support Source A in its implication that concerns about immorality came from the churches in the USA?
- Source C supported Scopes against the law banning teaching evolution. Copy this table. Add more rows to explain how we know this.

Feature	Explanation
Teacher wears black glasses	Blind people wore black glasses, suggests teacher is made to wear dark glasses so he can't see the truth.

The Monkey Trial

While the Sacco and Vanzetti trial became a public demonstration of anti-immigrant feelings, another trial in the 1920s – the Monkey Trial – became the focus of ill-feeling between rural and urban USA.

Most urban people in the 1920s would have believed in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. This said that over millions of years human beings evolved from ape-like ancestors.

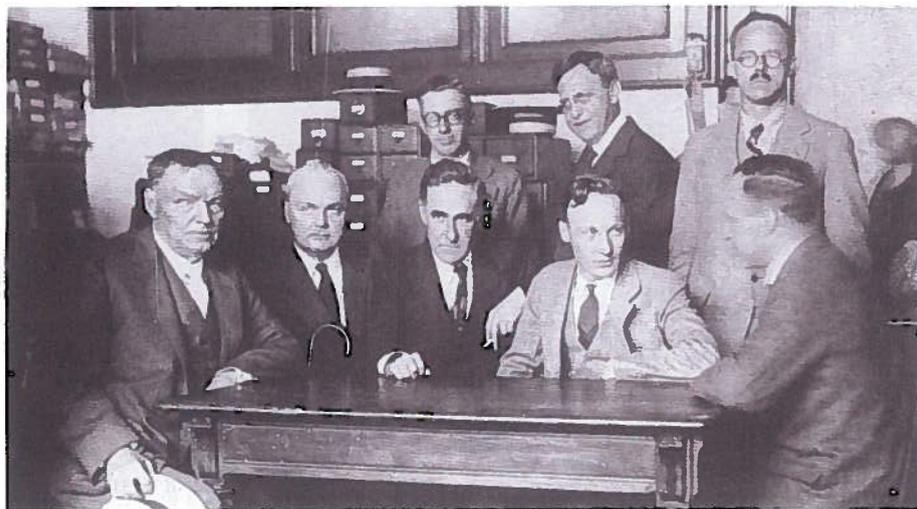
Many rural Americans, however, disagreed. They were very religious people. They were mostly Protestants. They went to church regularly and believed in the Bible. When the Bible told them that God made the world in six days, and that on the sixth day He created human beings to be like Him, they took the teachings literally. People with these views were known as Fundamentalists. They were particularly strong in the 'Bible Belt' states such as Tennessee.

At school, however, even in these states, most children were taught evolution. Fundamentalists felt that this was undermining their own religion. It seemed to be yet another example of the USA's abandoning traditional values in the headlong rush to modernise in the 1920s. They decided to roll back the modern ideas and so, in six states, the Fundamentalists led by William Jennings Bryan managed to pass a law banning the teaching of 'evolution'.

A biology teacher called John Scopes deliberately broke the law so that he could be arrested and put his case against Fundamentalism in the courts. The best lawyers were brought in for both sides and in July 1925, in the stifling heat of a Tennessee courtroom, the USA's traditionalists joined battle with its modernists.

The trial captured public imagination and the arguments on both sides were widely reported in the press. Scopes was convicted of breaking the law, but it was really American Fundamentalism itself which was on trial – and it lost! At the trial the anti-evolutionists were subjected to great mockery. Their arguments were publicly ridiculed and their spokesman Bryan, who claimed to be an expert on religion and science, was shown to be ignorant and confused. After the trial, the anti-evolution lobby never recovered.

SOURCE 54



John Scopes (seated second from the right) surrounded by his lawyers.