Inherit the Monkey Trial

Scopes-trial historian Ed Larson explains why Christians should be taught evolution.

By Karl Giberson & Donald Yerxa

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Before last year's controversial decision in Kansas, the most famous symbol of the struggle between religion and science was the 1925 John Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee. Heralded as the original "trial of the century," the case pitted conservative Christianity (in the person of William Jennings Bryan) against Darwinian evolution (represented by Clarence Darrow). For decades, the most compelling account of the event was Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's 1955 play, *Inherit the Wind*. The play "all but replaced the actual trial in the nation's memory," says Edward J. Larson, a historian of science and professor of law at the University of Georgia.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (1997), Larson cogently exposed the myths surrounding the trial and shed fresh light on long-obscured details about the case. Karl and Donald Yerxa recently spoke with Larson about Kansas, Scopes, and the perennial tension between science and faith in America.

What do you think of the Kansas decision to remove evolution and the Big Bang from the subjects on which students will be tested?

I think that students should learn about evolution, and they should learn about the Big Bang. I think that's part of a basic education. I understand it was a political compromise in that state. And I hope that most individual school districts will still be teaching those subjects, because I think students should learn them.

How would you advise a school board on how to handle this issue so that there wouldn't be the need for so much political turmoil?

I would look at the local school district and the local situation,

and I would try to educate the teachers and the parents about the importance of having a comprehensive education. If there were considerable local opposition to evolution, I would try to do as much as I could to present it in a sensitive way that taught as much as one could teach within the parameters that you have there, but look for ways to work the subject in without closing minds. These are important ideas that every educated person in America should understand. They should be taught in a way that encourages inquisitiveness and helps people understand the scientific method and what science is claiming to know and claiming to teach. The starting point is a level of respect for human beings, respect for ideas, respect for the scientific process, and respect for religion.

Why did you write a book on the Scopes trial?

I knew the trial wasn't very well understood. During my dissertation research, I had looked into the event. And in my earlier book, *Trial and Error*, there are a couple of pages on the Scopes trial. In researching just that little snippet, I had discovered that there was a rich body of archival literature that no historian had ever used.

We now know that *Inherit the Wind* isn't the most historically accurate portrayal of the event.

There is now a better historical perspective in the sense that, when the earlier books were written, fundamentalism and anti-evolutionism were virtually invisible in America. *Inherit the Wind* and also *Six Days or Forever?*—Ray Ginger's scholarly book of the same period—were written in the shadow of McCarthyism and the threat to popular and individual liberty. They were consciously and explicitly written with McCarthy-era witch-hunts of communists and socialists in mind, and were looking back at the Scopes trial as an earlier episode of that.

Today we have a new perspective on fundamentalism and anti-evolutionism. They are still alive in America; they weren't slain in Dayton. And that was always part of the premise of *Inherit the Wind* and *Six Days or Forever?*: that the exposing of Bryan killed these movements. And it didn't.

You and Larry Witham revived James Leuba's 1914 and 1933 surveys of scientists to get a sense of how today's scientific community views belief in God. What are your findings?

Well, it was a curious task to have to repeat Leuba's question, because he had a very particular definition of God that may exclude many people. He was asking about belief in a traditional theistic God that would resonate with traditional Jews, Muslims, or Christians. There was a lot of talk back at the turn of the century that positivism and science were routing belief in God, and so he did a survey of both the rank-and-file scientists and the scientific elite—surveys that we were able to reproduce. Leuba found about 40 percent belief among the rank and file and much lower belief among elites, and that's exactly what we found.

As a historian, I was interested in Leuba's survey because it had been so important in the Scopes trial. William Jennings Bryan had made Leuba's findings the centerpiece of his anti-evolution crusade. Bryan's prime evidence against evolution was the high level of disbelief among scientists, so I was interested in the precise question as Leuba had framed it. And we found that the response was basically constant over time.

How do you explain the Phillip Johnson phenomenon and the emergence of intelligent design in the origins discussion?

I think Phil Johnson is a very articulate speaker and advocate. He is obviously a skilled lawyer, and he's raising popular concerns and questions in the sense that if you believe in a traditional Christian God --and it doesn't have to be a fundamentalist God—don't you believe that God could interfere in nature? And if you believe that God could interfere in nature, don't you believe that God did interfere in nature? And if God did interfere in nature, then how can you understand natural phenomena without at least considering God as the author of such phenomena? So his argument against philosophical naturalism in science, as he likes to put it, has an instinctive appeal to many Americans.

Does this line of reasoning appeal to you?

Johnson has got to bring scientists into the debate, and there has to be a controversy within the scientific community. There have to be scientists who start doing intelligent design as science. And I haven't yet seen that happen. But in the end, if Johnson and others in the intelligent-design movement are going to change science, it is going to have to be through scientists and not through the general public.

What would "intelligent design as science" look like?

That's for the scientists to decide. You can come up with wonderful definitions about what science is: it is a falsifiable enterprise and a set of shifting paradigms, et cetera. But I take the journeyman view that science is what scientists do and that scientists define their profession just as other people define their profession. So I think the key test for intelligent design will come if and when scientists start doing intelligent design.

Part of the reason for Phillip Johnson's success is the perception that there are people like Richard Dawkins, missionaries for naturalism with an agenda that goes beyond trying to help people understand evolution. Dawkins's public writings are certainly hostile to religion. Do scholars like Dawkins become their own worst enemies by attaching to science an aggressively antireligious stance?

I don't think they are their own worst enemies. I think that they are reaching a broad and powerful audience. And I think for all the people they turn off, they inspire a whole other group. Richard Dawkins makes many religious people furious, but he inspires them to think harder and debate the issue harder. He wants to raise those questions, and I have met many students who have been profoundly inspired to go into science and make a career in science because of books like Dawkins's *The Blind Watchmaker*.

But certainly I do think that figures like Dawkins are lightning rods. As a result of the controversy they raise, there is a perception in America that there is a warfare between science

and religion.

One of the reasons that our survey of science and religious belief got so much attention was that it found that 40 percent of scientists in America believe in something like the traditional God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. And that was newsworthy. It's not newsworthy when a dog bites a person; it's newsworthy when a person bites a dog, and this was a person-bites-dog story.

It was also front-page news when Leuba first published his survey, but then it was shocking that only 40 percent of scientists believed in God. Now it is newsworthy for the opposite reason: 40 percent is a much higher percentage than many people today would have guessed. And that perception—that scientists by and large don't believe in God, that science and traditional religious belief are fundamentally irreconcilable—comes in part from the public voice of science.

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Summer for the Gods is available for purchase at the Christianity Online bookstore. The first chapter can be read at the C-SPAN Web site. Reviews of the book are available from First Things, the Los Angeles Times, and World Magazine. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported on Larson in 1998 when he won the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to Christianity Today, Larson has also done interviews about the book with PBS and Amazon.com.

The Kansas City Star's Web site offers extensive reporting on the Kansas School Board's controversial decision not to include questions about evolution and the Big Bang on state tests. Last year, CNN reported the views of George W. Bush and Al Gore regarding the teaching of creation and evolution in public schools. In March, CNN and The Washington Post looked at the efforts of other states to deal with this issue.

Christian History, a Christianity Today sister publication, reported on the Scopes trial and the rise of Fundamentalism in Issue 55. The issue includes a history of the Scopes trial as well as press coverage at the time. Another overview of the trial can be found at ABCNEWS.com. Karl W. and Donald A. Yerxa discuss the Scopes trial in the context of a Books & Culture

article on Darwin's impact on American culture. Gregg Easterbrook has written a series of articles on the Scopes trial for Beliefnet.

Excerpts from the Scopes trial transcript, a firsthand account of the proceedings, H.L. Mencken's reports on the trial, and a photocopy of the evolution pages from the 1914 biology textbook John Scopes used can be found at Famous Trials in American History. Access Excellence offers a classroom activity where students can recreate the Scopes trial and determine whether Scopes would be found guilty if put on trial today.

Bryan College, founded shortly after Bryan's death, has reams of material on Bryan and the trial and will sponsor a Scopes Trial Play and Festival this summer. The college's Web site also has a history of Bryan and the trial.

Carol Iannone's "The Truth About Inherit the Wind," which appeared in First Things in 1997, is a pointed critique of Inherit the Wind, the 1960 film loosely based on the Scopes trial. Other critical evaluations of the film can be found at Does God Exist? and Answers in Genesis.

The creation/evolution controversy has continued to spawn court cases. Significant U.S. court decisions regarding the teaching of evolution and creation in public schools include Epperson v. Arkansas (1968), McLean v. Arkansas(1982), Edwards v. Aguillard(1987), Peloza v. Capistrano School District (1994), and Freiler v. Tangipahoa Parish Board of Education (1999).