



The Scopes Monkey Trial: Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan Debate the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools

Air Date: July 1, 1925

Narrator: Hi, I'm Terry Gross and this is *Fresh Air*. Today we're talking to two people who have been intimately involved in the recent debate brought about by *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, referred to by many as the "Scopes Monkey Trial." This trial has brought to the fore a national debate about what we should and should not teach in our schools. With us to discuss the issues are attorneys William Jennings Bryan, representing the State of Tennessee and a former candidate for President, and Clarence Darrow, representing teacher John Scopes.

As many of you know, the State of Tennessee has charged John Thomas Scopes with violating the Butler Act, which makes it unlawful to teach human evolution in any of Tennessee's public schools. Scopes, aware of the offer of the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, to defend anyone willing to contest the law, largely took on his role so that the case might come to light. Scopes, his attorney Clarence Darrow, and the ACLU are countering that science, not religion, should be the focus of science classrooms.

So, with this background in mind, let me start with you Mr. Darrow. Why did the ACLU want this case to come forward now and why did you decide to defend Mr. Scopes?

Darrow: Well first, Terry, let me say what a big fan I am of Fresh Air and thank you providing a forum for this important discussion. I also want to thank my good friend, Will Bryan, for being here. He is an incredible attorney and it has been a privilege to work in the same courtroom with him.

Bryan: Ah, Clarence, you're too kind. But thank you for those kind words. It's a pleasure for me as well.

Darrow: Always a pleasure Will! So Terry, to answer your first question: the ACLU has long held that the Butler Act is unlawful—unconstitutional even—because it prohibits freedom of speech, freedom of belief, and more specifically it denies teachers academic freedom, without which new knowledge really ceases to exist. The ACLU sought out a teacher willing to go against the grain—which is no easy thing to do in 1925 Tennessee—and break free of the constraints of moral rectitude and mythology and instead teach what science tells us: that it is most likely that humans, like all plants and creatures alive today, slowly arrived at their state from a gradual process that Charles Darwin called natural selection.

Narrator: By natural selection you mean evolution?

Darrow: Simply put, yes. But it's important to remember that many people have a misconception of what "evolution" really means. They think that to believe in evolution is to deny the word of God, aka the Bible.

Bryan: With all due respect to my esteemed colleague, the State of Tennessee and, honestly, all reasonable men know that it is impossible *not* to think that. We must face the fact that Darwin's "theories" are heresy; they are an affront to people of faith because they directly counter the teachings of the Bible.

Darrow: I certainly understand the point Mr. Bryan makes and I by no means want to offend the good people of Tennessee or people of faith here in the U.S. or worldwide. But the point we are making—one that is nuanced rather than blunt—is that evolution is not by definition antithetical to the teachings in the Bible. If I may, I'll give an example: the notion of the creation story and what constitutes "six days."