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## Article Title: William Jennings Bryan, Evolution, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

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Article Summary: Following the Scopes Trial in 1925, William Jennings Bryan was widely considered to be the main leader of the Fundamentalist position. However, the author argues that William Jennings Bryan had little to do with the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century origins of Fundamentalism, and that he differed from most fundamentalist leaders in theology, tactics, and his view of the nature of American society. The author further argues that evolution was a peripheral issue among fundamentalists until Bryan made it a central issue in the 1920s.

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Photographs / Images: Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan on September 1, 1914, signing peace treaties with representatives of Spain, France, Great Britain, and China; William Jennings Bryan asleep on a train about 1920; Opposing lawyers at the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan; Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton; Methodist Church in Normal, a suburb of Lincoln, where Bryan went to church

**WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, EVOLUTION,  
AND THE  
FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY**

By FERENC M. SZASZ

The Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the 1920's caused a social and religious upheaval of major proportions. It produced disruption in almost all the large Protestant churches, especially among the Baptists and the Presbyterians, and in all sections of the country, especially the South. The most important individual connected with the controversy was William Jennings Bryan, three-time candidate for the presidency of the United States. At the time of his death in 1925, five days after his clash with Clarence Darrow at the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, there were few who did not regard him as the main leader of the Fundamentalist position. The editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* claimed that Bryan personified orthodox Christianity. The popular journalist Glenn Frank went even further. "Mr. Bryan is Fundamentalism," said Frank. "If we can understand him, we can understand Fundamentalism."<sup>1</sup>

Actually, however, these commentators were quite mistaken. Bryan was by no means the main leader of the Fundamentalist movement, and he certainly was not Fundamentalism itself. In fact, Bryan differed considerably from the other important Fundamentalist figures over such items as theology, tactics, and the nature of American society. He played no role at all in the late 19th and early 20th century formation of Fundamentalism, and when he did become involved, in the early years of the 1920's, he changed the nature of the controversy beyond recognition. When Bryan joined the conflict, he brought with him the issue of anti-evolution, which had been on the periphery until

that time. But after his entry, the burden of the Fundamentalist message became the passage of anti-evolution laws in every state. Under the umbrella of the constant press coverage which was his wherever he went, Bryan allowed the various factions of Fundamentalism to work together for common goals. But on his death in 1925, each began to split off and go its separate way. The purpose of this article is to show how Bryan and the evolution issue changed the nature of the emerging Fundamentalist movement, and how, in so doing, he forced upon the nation his understanding of the condition of the world in the early 1920's.

First, however, it will be necessary to sketch a bit of background. In general, one may say that the period after the Civil War was not an easy time for American Protestantism. In those years the churches first faced a series of dilemmas which they still have not solved. On a social level they met the rapid growth of industrialism, the influx of Catholic and Jewish immigration, and the sudden rise of large, impersonal cities. On the intellectual level they met the European ideas of Darwinian evolution, comparative study of religion, and higher criticism of the Scriptures. The result of this was to produce an uneasy feeling of isolation in the average American Protestant. At the same time his faith in his fellow man was being shaken by the new immigration, so also was his faith in God being shaken by the new European intellectual currents.

These same years also witnessed the growth of two distinct groups within most of the Protestant denominations, and these, because there are no better terms, must be called "liberal" and "conservative." The liberal elements tended to absorb the idea of evolution (not, however, natural selection); to replace the traditional disputes over theology with a renewed concern over common ethics; and to accept the principles and findings of the Biblical critics. Moreover, by the first decade of the 20th century, the liberals had made considerable inroads into the various seminaries and denominational organizations. They also established their own organization in the Federal Council of Churches.

Conservatives, however, moved steadily in other directions. They harbored a suspicion of evolution, declared that correct theology was as important as shared ethics, rejected most of the

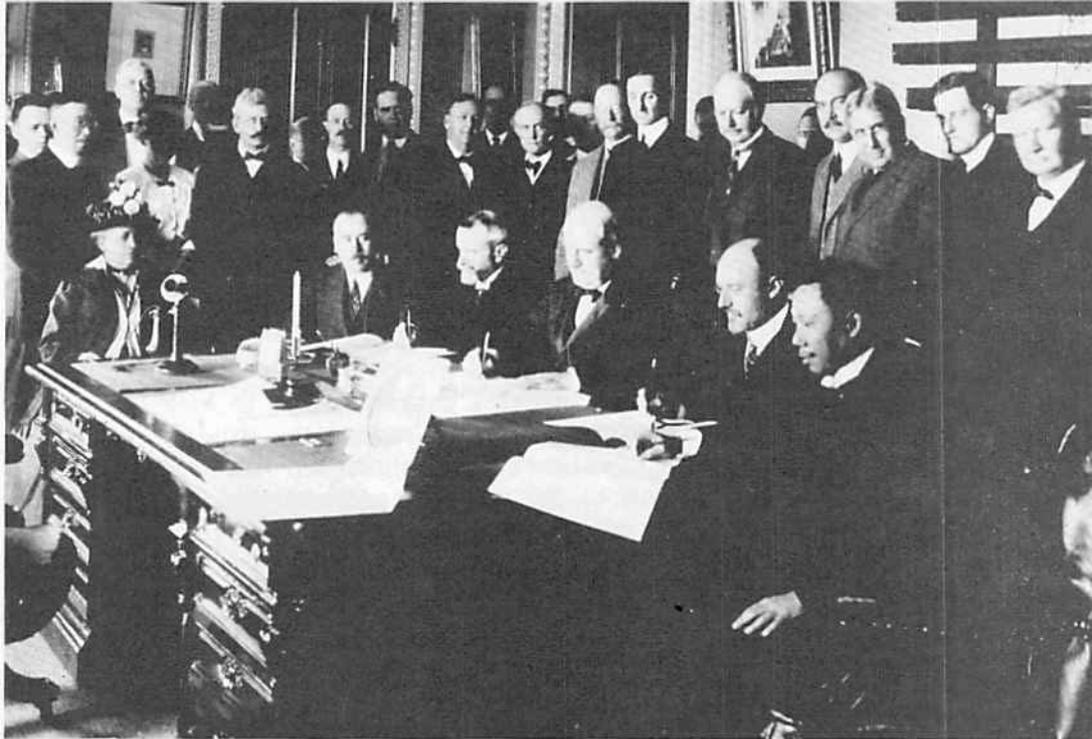
ideas of higher critics, and spoke out against the menace of theological liberalism. They, too, began to form their own organizations in the various Bible schools and in permanent Bible conferences.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the early Fundamentalist concern seems to have been directed not toward evolution but toward the issue of higher criticism. The rise of critical Biblical scholarship distressed conservatives, for the goal of the critics — understanding the Bible — was theirs also. Who was to say, however, when the critics disagreed among themselves? As a reaction, conservatives declared that they believed in higher criticism only when it was “rightly used” or “correctly employed.” In turn they placed their emphasis upon a literal reading of every Biblical passage. This emphasis was new in Protestantism, for the earlier conflicts over the Bible had generally involved the correct interpretation of passages, not the literal infallibility contained within.

It was not long before fear of critical scholarship began to seep down to a popular level. In 1904 an Anti-Higher Criticism League was formed in New York and that same year a woman threw one of the religious sessions at the St. Louis World's Fair into disruption when she arose and denounced the practice. “We of Saint Louis,” she said, “[are] not going to be led astray by this dangerous trifling with the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

The gradual rise of the fundamentalist insistence on Biblical literalism can only be understood as part of the opposition to an equally gradual rise of higher criticism. Biblical criticism seemed to strike at the very heart of American Protestantism. If its basic principles were accepted, the average man could no longer read and understand the Bible for himself. He would be forced to turn to a new elite — the higher critics — to explain to him what God meant in the *Old* and *New Testaments*. Biblical literalism seemed to supply an answer to this dilemma: it alone could restore the Word of God to the ordinary citizen.

It would be a mistake, however, to equate orthodox 19th century evangelical Protestantism with Fundamentalism as it emerged in the 20th century. Ernest R. Sandeen has shown that the various conservative conferences introduced a whole new aspect into the traditional Protestant outlook — that of dispensationalism.<sup>4</sup> Dispensationalism is a complex theology which claims that all time is divided into separate ages or dispensations,



*Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan (center, seated) on September 1, 1914, signed peace treaties with representatives of Spain, France, Great Britain, and China. Bryan resigned from the Cabinet in 1916.*

that God demands special actions from man during each age, and that each age is brought to a violent close by His direct intervention. The role of the minister, therefore, is to draw out a select body of the faithful before the world is consumed. Numerous lists and charts of the "final days" appeared from 1875 to 1920, and while there might be disagreement as to specifics, all dispensationalists could agree that America was hurrying toward the end of time. It would not be long before Christ would return bodily, draw up the true church of believers into His bosom, and inaugurate the thousand years of peace.<sup>5</sup>

By the second decade of the 20th century, two distinct groups existed within many of the major Protestant denominations. Although close observers feared a split at any moment, the reform spirit of the Progressive Movement and the emotional challenge of World War I both served to mask these internal differences. Thus, an organized Fundamentalist movement did not really emerge until after the Armistice of 1918, when a period of great optimism swept over the nation. Flushed with victory over Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and the success of prohibition, conservatives organized groups which moved out into

the field to sway the various denominations and the nation to their own point of view. "I believe the hour has come," said E. A. Wollam in the magazine of Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, "when the evangelistic forces of this country, primarily the Bible Institutes, should not only rise up in defense of the faith, but should become a united and offensive power." Conservative Baptists began protesting against liberalism in their annual denominational meetings. Massive evangelical conferences were called in 1918 and 1919 and plans were laid for what some considered the "new Reformation." Waves of conservative evangelical speakers swept across the country catching the liberal elements completely off guard as they presented their brand of the gospel message to thousands. This wave of evangelism, one of the largest of the century, was primarily a call to the people to accept God's grace and be saved. Basically, it was couched in positive terms. It did not attack other sects, higher criticism, or evolution.<sup>6</sup> In fact, evolution was not mentioned in the first wave of organized Fundamentalism. That issue arose only with the entrance of William Jennings Bryan.

William Jennings Bryan had little to do with the late 19th and early 20th century origins of Fundamentalism. As far as can be determined, he was in no way connected with the interdenominational Fundamentalist conferences or the Bible schools. He was not even intimately involved with the emerging Fundamentalist wing of his own Presbyterian Church. Although he frequently attended the Presbyterian General Assembly as a delegate, he never went to lobby for any particular position, except, perhaps, prohibition.

From its earliest days Bryan's career was grounded in evangelical Protestantism, but he was never much concerned with theological liberalism or evolution. His chief interest lay in the development of character. For example, when the *Christian Herald* in 1909 asked him to comment on a liberal minister's claim that the 20th century might need a new religion, Bryan said: "The Christian life, is, after all, the unanswerable argument in support of the Christian religion, and the Christian life Dr. Elliott leads will probably aid Christianity more than his words can hurt it."<sup>7</sup> He didn't even mention the dangers of liberalism in a lengthy letter he wrote in 1918 expressing his ideas for improvement in the Presbyterian Church.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the collection

of his correspondence at the Library of Congress shows that before 1921 his chief contact with the ministerial community was with theological liberals — men such as Washington Gladden and Charles Stelzle, who were both strong advocates of the social gospel. After the war he was elected to the general committee of the radical Interchurch World Movement of North America. In 1919 he stated that he felt the liberal Federal Council of Churches was the “greatest religious organization in our nation.”<sup>9</sup>

Nor can one say that Bryan had a long-standing concern with evolution. Although his most famous lecture, *The Prince of Peace*, which he began delivering shortly after his 1900 defeat, contains a passing reference to evolution, too much can easily be made of this. He never gave any speeches specifically against evolution, and in *The Prince of Peace* he cautioned his listeners that he was not attacking those who did believe in Darwinism. He simply said that he felt more proof was needed. His chief objection to evolution was teleological, for he felt that acceptance of the theory would cause man to lose the consciousness of God’s presence in his daily life. Surely there is a difference between a passing comment against evolution and the decision to devote one’s whole life to stopping it.<sup>10</sup>

The outbreak of World War I totally changed Bryan’s outlook. In 1915 Baptist minister A. C. Dixon convinced him that the rise of German militarism was based not on Friedrich Nietzsche but on the following of Darwinism to its logical conclusion. Shortly thereafter, he came across *The Science of Power* (1918) by Benjamin Kidd which argued the same thesis, and he recommended it to his friends. He was also disturbed by the statistical study of Professor James H. Leuba of Bryn Mawr College which proposed to show that the faith of college students was rapidly declining. As he explained to an audience in Chicago in April, 1923:

So I began to feel a little more earnestly about the effect of Darwinism. I had found that Darwin was undermining the Christian faith, and then I found he had become the basis of the world’s most brutal war, and then I found that Benjamin Kidd pointed out that he is the basis of the discord in industry.<sup>11</sup>

Something, obviously, had to be done about this situation.

Bryan had been out of the news since his resignation from Woodrow Wilson’s Cabinet in 1915, and from that time until

the Armistice, his general reputation was not high. But with his new crusade against evolution, Bryan moved once again back onto the front pages of the newspapers, where he remained until his death. In so doing he effectively captured the emerging Fundamentalist movement. Aware of the problems which the churches were having, the national press seized upon Bryan as the representative figure of Fundamentalism; this, too, helped determine the future path of the controversy. Some conservative leaders such as Episcopalian Bishop W. T. Manning and Presbyterian theologian J. G. Machen ignored the evolution issue. As soon as Bryan began his campaign against evolution, what had been primarily an interchurch controversy was suddenly brought to the attention of the entire nation. Moreover, his championing of anti-evolution so overshadowed all the other aspects of the Fundamentalist position that it alone came to be seen as the center of the movement. With this, Fundamentalism began to shift to the negative, for opposing evolution can only be viewed as the last line of defense.

Bryan first began attacking evolution seriously in the spring of 1920, but so long as he spoke chiefly to church audiences, there was little difficulty. It was not until he took this message to the college campuses that the country began to sit up and take notice. In the fall of 1920, he visited the University of Michigan and spoke there to an estimated 4,500 persons. In his address he soundly attacked Darwinism as a false and vicious mode of thinking. No sooner had he left than he began to receive letters commenting on the controversy he had stirred up there. One which particularly annoyed him came from the Reverend Arthur W. Stalker of the First Methodist Church in Ann Arbor. The Reverend Mr. Stalker criticized him for the false alternatives he had posed and claimed that until his speech, the issue of evolution had been a dead one for most of the Michigan students. He intimated that Bryan would lose his influence with the American people if he continued to speak along those lines. Hurt and annoyed, Bryan fired back an angry letter and then sat down to expand and elaborate his anti-evolution arguments. He printed up 5,000 copies of his new speech, *The Menace of Darwinism*, and sent them out for distribution. A large number were sent to Ann Arbor and he was pleased to discover when he returned that a scientist and philosopher had both taken time to denounce him.<sup>12</sup>

In the fall of 1921, Bryan started a similar controversy when he went to the campus of Middlebury College in Vermont. In early 1922 he caused a real uproar when he denounced evolution at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The president of the university, E. A. Birge, was furious. After the talk the two men exchanged words and Birge denounced Bryan in the next day's papers.<sup>13</sup> Bryan, in turn, replied that the people of Wisconsin might like to select a new head of their university, one who would not ridicule the faith of the students' parents. He intimated Birge might be an atheist. He also claimed that the taxpayers had a right to determine what should be taught in the university and that they should not tolerate any teaching which might negate the Christian religion. Bryan's controversy with Birge dragged on for over a year and was marked by a generally low tone.<sup>14</sup>

The press began calling on him. The *New York Times* asked him to present his objection to Darwinism, and he did so in the February 26, 1922, Sunday edition in the article "God and Evolution." This immediately triggered a response from the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick whose "Mr. Bryan and Evolution" was carried by the *Times* in March and later reprinted by the *Christian Century*. H. F. Osborn and E. G. Conklin also joined Fosdick in replying to Bryan. Osborn noted:

Early in the year of 1922, I was suddenly aroused from my reposeful researches in paleontology by an article in the *New York Times* . . . by William Jennings Bryan . . . and it struck me immediately that Bryan's article was far more able and convincing than any previous utterance of his or any other fundamentalist, and that there should not be a moment's delay in replying to it.<sup>15</sup>

In 1923 *The Forum* asked Bryan to give them an article on "The Fundamentals" and he gladly obliged.<sup>16</sup> It was not long before Bryan was being credited with causing all the nation's Fundamentalist activity.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, with Bryan's entrance the question of the infallibility of the Bible was brought into politics. Had the issue remained in the churches, the outcry would have been considerably less. As it was, however, scientists and educators joined with the liberal Protestants to keep a group of anti-evolutionist Fundamentalists from carrying out their plans.

After 1922 Bryan increased his anti-evolution activity in a steady fashion. Except for the election campaign of 1924 (in which his brother Charles ran for vice-president on the Democratic ticket), he concentrated most of his energy on this cru-



*An inveterate Chautauqua speaker, William Jennings Bryan was often forced to sleep on trains with few accommodations. This picture was taken about 1920.*

sade. He once wrote that he felt "called . . . to try to save young people from Darwin's false and demoralizing guesses."<sup>18</sup> He spoke before the state legislatures of Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee and on college campuses across the country. He even took his cause to the "enemies' country" of Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, and Brown. But he told a University of Florida audience that "the colleges of the South [were] less affected than others," and said he expected "the South to lead in the fight against this influence."<sup>19</sup> His most responsive crowds were in the South, and this illustrates the increasing parochialism of his general outlook. He was successful, however, in calling the South to a renewed consciousness of its distinctive religious position.

In addition to his public speaking, Bryan kept his own Northern Presbyterian Church in turmoil over the issue of evolution from 1922 on. He almost split the denomination in two in 1923 when he was narrowly defeated for moderator by Charles D. Wishart. The prospect of the head of a major Protestant church traversing the land denouncing evolution would have caused untold controversy. The next year he helped elect

the conservative Clarence E. Macartney as moderator and was, in turn, appointed vice-moderator. He agreed not to run for the head office again unless there was no chance of causing a similar disruption. He opened the 1925 general assembly with a prayer, but did little else. Although he was often seen as one of the leaders of the Presbyterian conservatives, his involvement with the inner workings of the church had never been close. By 1925 he was even moving away from the more radical wing of the Presbyterian Fundamentalists.<sup>20</sup>

It is fascinating to chart the road by which evolution — following in Bryan's wake — came to be seen as the ultimate enemy of evangelical Protestantism. Higher criticism was the real danger to the conservative position, but it was an awkward field for debate. One would have to be fluent in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic to discuss it intelligently. Here was one area gladly given over to scholars. Rationalism, often depicted as a major evil, was an old and tired enemy, and American Christianity has lacked a strong rationalist tradition with which to spar. Each age produced its own defender, but he usually stood conspicuously alone. Clarence Darrow, Joseph Lewis, and Charles Smith were prominent representatives of aggressive rationalism for the 1920's, but even the most generous estimate would label their impact as very mild. Moreover, rationalism was an old foe and could hardly be blamed for the war. Liberalism and modernism were freely bandied about as evils but everyone in the 1920's was in some sense modern, and Bryan, if anything, was a liberal. Evolution served perfectly as an explanation for what was wrong with the nation. It was new, it was different, and it had sinister connotations. Moreover, it was so loosely used that it could include complaints which all held in common and yet allow everyone to keep his own emphasis. As such, it explained Protestantism's failure to capture the 1920's. "God won the war," A. J. Brown reported to the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1924, "but thus far the devil is winning the peace. Few, if any, of the objects for which we declared we were waging war have been achieved."<sup>21</sup> It was through the issue of evolution that Bryan could identify with the Fundamentalist movement, and it was through this issue that they could capture him as their own.

Bryan's national prominence and his general disposition were such that many people and organizations tried to use him for

their own benefit. In a sense, the main interdenominational Fundamentalist organizations were especially guilty of this. Their success might well be credited to Bryan's lack of realization as to how much their respective programs and methods differed.

As soon as they discovered their ally, organized Fundamentalism increasingly demanded his aid. T. C. Horton of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and the Reverend J. W. Porter of Louisville bombarded him with suggestions that he lead a national organization devoted to their cause.<sup>22</sup> He toyed with the idea and even went so far as to design an emblem. His son, William Jennings Bryan, Jr., also talked to Horton about the possibility, but nothing was done. William B. Riley of Minneapolis, director of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, was successful in getting Bryan to speak twice and urged him, unsuccessfully, to be allowed to arrange a series of additional addresses. Riley was eager to push Bryan to the forefront of his WCFA. In 1922 the WCFA voted to have him head a committee to organize the laymen of the country, but because of his other work and the illness of his wife, he refused.<sup>23</sup> The next year without his knowledge they voted him president of the entire organization. Again he turned them down.<sup>24</sup> Many of the Fundamentalist magazines repeatedly asked him for articles, and when he did give them something, they wanted to use his name on the masthead as an associate editor.<sup>25</sup>

An obvious attempt to use Bryan came in 1924 from Baptist minister J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth, Texas. The governor of Texas was thinking of introducing an anti-evolution bill into the legislature and Norris predicted that two Bryan addresses would change the minds of ten million people. Without Bryan's consent he made arrangements for special trains to bring in the faithful from the surrounding areas to hear him. Bryan toyed with the idea of journeying to Texas, since he also had an invitation from the Texas legislature, but he felt that it would not be worth his effort unless the governor decided to have his forces submit the bill on the house floor. This was not done, so Bryan did not make the trip. He was mortified when Norris offered him \$1,000 if he would change his mind. "I am doing the best I can," he replied, "and those who are not satisfied with the amount of work I am doing are, I hope, in a position to do more."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most blatant attempt to use his efforts came from the National Federated Evangelistic Committee. When Bryan expressed general favor with their work, General Secretary James H. Larson made him president of the organization. His friend, W. E. Biederwolf, assured Bryan that he would not have to take any active part, but Larson was a bit too eager. Bryan was surprised to discover that their new stationery prominently displayed his name on the masthead and that Larson had, with much publicity, scheduled an extensive tour for him across the continent. Finally, Bryan sent an angry letter withdrawing entirely from the organization. "While I feel interest in your work," he wrote, "it is not mine, and I will not allow you to decide for me what God wants me to do. . . . I have my work to do and I must do it my way. Your way and my way are entirely different and opposite." Further unctuous pleas from Larson went ignored.<sup>27</sup>

The variegated Fundamentalist organizations had their own ideas for planning Bryan's life, and considering the pressures placed on him, it is surprising that he resisted as well as he did. Bryan was in many cases willing to be used, of course, but one wonders if he realized how vastly different his program was from most of the other organized Fundamentalists. It is doubtful if many of them ever voted for him. The officials of Moody Bible Institute on his death admitted that they never had. Moreover, Bryan and other Fundamentalist figures had very different conceptions of evolution. The Reverend John R. Straton of New York, for example, opposed evolution primarily because it carried with it the idea of relativity in morals. William B. Riley of Minneapolis opposed it on theological grounds. Bryan opposed it, as the recent studies by W. H. Smith and L. W. Levine have shown, because he felt that by destroying regeneration, evolution would also destroy social reform. In his last speech against evolution, he noted that "by paralyzing the hope for reform, it discourages those who labor for the improvement of man's position."<sup>28</sup> The burden of Bryan's inspirational talks was that of service. It was the duty of man, he told countless thousands on the Chautauqua circuit, to overflow with righteous life and become a reformer. But he felt that evolution limited social reform to a slow, gradual process that man could not effect. The doctrines of the survival of the fittest and gradual improvement he saw as paralyzing individual Christian action



*Opposing lawyers at the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (1925), were Clarence Darrow, Chicago lawyer (left), for the defense; and William Jennings Bryan (right), for the prosecution. . . . Scene of the trial was the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton (right).*





*When in Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan attended the Methodist Church in Normal, a suburb of the city near his farm. In the latter 1820's a Bryan Memorial Church was built in Miami, Florida.*

and the application of Christian principles to all aspects of society. This concern does not exist in the writings of the other Fundamentalists.

There were other differences than those over evolution, too. For one thing, Bryan had had no theological training and much of the controversy went over his head. For example, he did not believe in the pre-millennial return of Christ, a position which was rapidly becoming a touchstone for much of Fundamentalism. Bryan once commented that there were too many people who did not believe in the first coming of Christ to worry about those who didn't believe in the second. While the conservative movement in the Presbyterian Church was generally, but not entirely, post-millennial, the most active, best-organized Fundamentalists were all pre-millennial. They tried to deny this, but it seems obvious that the majority held this belief. And, of course, Bryan was not a dispensationalist. He did not view the periodic cataclysmic entrance of the Lord into history as an important item of belief. The burden of much of the northern Fundamentalist message was the removal of the holy church from the sinful world. Bryan did not want this at all. He wanted to *merge* Christianity and the world. This, although he would have denied it, was almost a liberal position. The issue over which Presbyterian conservative J. G. Machen left Princeton was Calvinism, but Bryan was no Calvinist. His comments dur-

ing the Scopes trial show that he was not really even a Biblical literalist. Thus, he did not hold the same doctrinal position as the conservatives among either Baptists or Presbyterians.

There were also decided differences between Bryan and the other Fundamentalists over the best tactics to be used in the campaign. Bryan did not approve of strong penalties for violation of an anti-evolution law. His faith in legality was such that he thought the simple passage of a law by a fairly elected legislature would be sufficient. Many of his comrades demanded harsh penalties, even prison terms for such violations. While Bryan had as much scorn heaped upon him in this venture as any of his companions, there was in him no anti-Semitism, no anti-Catholicism, and no ballyhoo. In fact, it was the breadth and depth of Bryan's personality that kept the movement together. When he died in 1925, the varied elements which it contained each went its own way. Glenn Frank's comment that Bryan was Fundamentalism could not have been further from the mark. He was unique, and the Fundamentalists were trying to utilize him for all his worth.

The differences between Bryan and the other Fundamentalists were lost, however, in the issue of evolution; and this connection was fixed forever in the public mind with the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee. The Scopes story is a familiar one. On March 21, 1925, Governor Austin Peay signed the state's anti-evolution bill into law, and shortly thereafter John T. Scopes, a teacher in the Dayton school system, volunteered to test it. The American Civil Liberties Union, which had been closely watching the case, offered to supply Clarence Darrow as the legal defense. In turn, the WCFA, which had been actively lobbying for the bill, persuaded Bryan to represent the prosecution. Thus was the stage set for what was to become the most widely reported trial in the nation's history. After the entry of Darrow and Bryan, few people were able to see the trial in terms other than those of "the meeting of the great forces of skepticism and faith."<sup>29</sup>

Europe watched with astonishment as America reopened a controversy which everyone felt had been closed for sixty years. For a continent which saw itself disgraced by the recent war, the spectacle was somewhat funny and comforting.<sup>30</sup> Although there were many serious issues involved in the Scopes trial—

such as the right of the people to control what was taught in the public schools — they were never faced directly. Instead, Dayton, Tennessee, soon became filled with religious fanatics of all persuasions. Egged on by the journalists, a mood of ballyhoo dominated the proceedings. As a result, the trial became a strange combination of both tragedy and farce. Both these themes were well illustrated on the final Monday of the proceedings when Darrow lured Bryan onto the platform. There he exposed the Great Commoner's lack of Biblical understanding to the world. Visibly upset, Bryan died in his sleep five days later.

The furor resulting from the trial had hardly begun to mount when news of Bryan's sudden death plunged the nation into mourning. The hooting of the skeptics stopped as abruptly as it started. A Broadway play making fun of him closed immediately. The *New Yorker* called back its current issue, and 20,000 copies of another national magazine were halted halfway across the continent so that a two-page section ridiculing him could be removed.<sup>31</sup> Editorials ranged from the extensive coverage of the *New York Times* to the compliments of the humblest weekly, and from the banal to the most perceptive. "Here in Great Britain we had almost no clue to him," remarked G. O. Griffith. "He remained an enigma, for his mentality eluded us."<sup>32</sup> Lord Herbert Asquith conceded that only America could have produced such a man.<sup>33</sup> William Allen White, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning, small-town journalist from Kansas, called him the best political diagnostician and the worst political practitioner that the country had ever seen. Never had he been wrong on a single diagnosis; never had he been right on a single solution.<sup>34</sup>

Whispers abounded, however, as he was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, that it was a good thing for his reputation that he died when he did. Few felt that the cause of anti-evolution, to which he appeared to be devoting his life, was worth the same degree of effort as has been his others — free silver, anti-imperialism, and prohibition. Dudley Field Malone, in a talk to a group of Unitarians, claimed that at the time of his death, Bryan was leading the most sinister movement of the day.<sup>35</sup> Strong evidence can be marshaled to suggest that in spite of his protestations that he had no plans after the Scopes trial, Bryan was indeed laying plans for what might well have been a new national crusade.<sup>36</sup>

After his death the most immediate question in Fundamentalist circles was who would take his place. "Everywhere I have been, I have been urged to take up Mr. Bryan's work," J. R. Straton of New York was quoted as saying. "It was unique and should be carried on. I would be willing to attempt it."<sup>37</sup> The able editor of the Baptist *Watchman-Examiner*, Curtis Lee Laws, however, noted that he could find no one authorized to select Straton to be the new leader of the Fundamentalists. "Mr. Bryan was never the leader of fundamentalism except that his prominence caused the papers to count him the leader," said Laws. "Fundamentalism has never had a leader. Any man can assume the leadership of a small or a large portion of the fundamentalists when they are willing to be led. It has been our experience and observation that the leadership of the fundamentalists is a pretty hard job."<sup>38</sup>

No one could take over the Fundamentalist movement from William Jennings Bryan because William Jennings Bryan had taken over the Fundamentalist movement. By his sudden increased interest in evolution, his lack of theological training, his concern for all aspects of Christianity, especially the social gospel, and the magic of his name, he had thrust himself into the center of the controversy. The newspapers kept him there until his death. Moreover, Bryan was an inclusive force whereas the other Fundamentalists were primarily exclusive. His tolerance, perspective, and genial warmth were to be found in none of his successors. In spite of their activities, none of his followers could approach the publicity which Bryan received just by being Bryan. After 1925 the Fundamentalist movement was largely limited to attempts at passing anti-evolution legislation and defections from the main line Protestant denominations.

"The newspapers ought to put up the money to build a memorial for Wm. Jennings," a friend wrote to Mark Sullivan, "because he was to the world of news what Babe Ruth is to baseball — the real drawing card, for anyone who is halfway fair has to admit that Bryan was new to his friends and enemies and the reading public 365 days a year."<sup>39</sup> His mantle, once he dropped it, could find no shoulders strong enough to carry it again. Bryan was unique in the Fundamentalist movement. He could never be replaced.

## NOTES

1. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 27, 1925; Glenn Frank, "William Jennings Bryan - A Mind Divided Against Itself," *The Century* (September, 1923), 794; cf., the comments of the *Sioux City Sunday Journal*, July 26, 1925, *Dallas Morning News*, July 27, 1925, *Wheeling Register*, July 27, 1925. Many later writers such as Lewis S. Feuer, *The Scientific Intellectual* (New York, 1963), 10, also view Bryan this way. The best accounts of the Fundamentalist movement are Norman Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven, 1954) and Stewart G. Cole, *History of Fundamentalism* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1963 - originally published 1931); See also, Ferenc M. Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders: The Roles of William Bell Riley, John Roach Straton and William Jennings Bryan in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1969). Paul Carter's two studies, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca, 1954), and *The Twenties in America* (New York, 1968) are helpful, as is Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1964).

2. A summary of the turmoil in this period can be found in Winthrop Hudson's comprehensive survey, *Religion in America* (New York, 1965). Proselytizers for many sects such as the Salvation Army, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Theosophy, Unity Church, etc., were also very active during these years. While the term "Fundamentalist" has often been used to include anyone from a 17th century Puritan to a modern day Christian Scientist, it should actually be restricted to a specific conservative movement within organized Protestantism from 1875 to about 1930. It will be so used in this essay.

3. *Christian Century*, XXI (June 2, 1904); *Ibid.*, October 6, 1904, quoted on 880.

4. Ernest R. Sandeen, "Towards a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History*, XXXVI (March, 1967), 66-83. My debt to Sandeen's work is obvious throughout this article. He argues that the chief source for dispensationalism came from Plymouth Brethren missionaries from England. See also *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, 1965); Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, 1960); and Harris F. Rall, *Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope* (New York, 1920).

5. This view was diametrically opposed to liberal post-millennialism, which argued that man would have to establish the thousand years of peace. Only then would Christ return and bring an end to Time.

6. Compare, for proof of this, the list of sermon topics for the Kansas City, Kansas, meetings held November 19-23, 1919, in the William B. Riley manuscript collection, Northwestern College, Roseville, Minn., and the sermons in *God Hath Spoken* (Philadelphia, 1919). The latter stemmed from the World's Conference on Christian Fundamentals, which was held in Philadelphia from May 25 to June 1, 1919. The Wollam quote is from *Christian Worker's Magazine* (April, 1919), 534. I have examined this liberal-conservative split more thoroughly in "Protestantism and the Search for Stability," in Jerry Israel, ed., *Building the Organizational Society* (New York, 1972).

7. WJB to *Christian Herald*, August 10, 1909, Bryan Manuscripts, Occidental College. Bryan has long been a subject of fascination for biographers. Paolo E. Coletta's *William Jennings Bryan: Political Puritan 1915-1925* (Lincoln, 1969) and

Lawrence W. Levine's *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan: the Last Decade, 1915-1925* (New York, 1965) are both excellent for the period covered. For Bryan's earlier career, Paul Glad's *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and his Democracy, 1896-1912* (Lincoln, 1960) and McKinley, *Bryan and the People* (New York, 1964) are able treatments.

8. WJB to J. R. Best, January 17, 1918, Bryan Manuscripts, Library of Congress.
9. *The Commoner*, XIX (May, 1919).
10. Bryan, *The Prince of Peace*, 11.
11. The quote is from Bryan's little-known speech as printed in *The Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXIII (April, 1923).
12. A. W. Stalker to WJB, December 1, 1920, A. W. Stalker to WJB, November 15, 1920; A. W. Stalker to WJB, January 31, 1921, Library of Congress. Levine, however, argues that his reputation was not seriously damaged by his resignation from Wilson's Cabinet, *Defender of the Faith*, 73-80.
13. *The Capital Times* (Madison, Wisconsin), February 7, 1922.
14. WJB to H. L. Hoard, December 13, 1921; WJB to Chester C. Platt, December 16, 1921, Bryan Manuscripts, Library of Congress; The story of this incident is well told in Irvin G. Wyllie, "Bryan, Birge, and the Wisconsin Evolution Controversy," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XXXV (Summer, 1952), 294-301.
15. Quoted in Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 287.
16. W. J. Bryan, "The Fundamentals," *The Forum*, LXV, (July, 1923), 1665-1680.
17. *New York Times*, February 3, 1922; *Ibid.*, February 9, 1922.
18. WJB to A. W. Stalker, dated December 9, 1923, but probably 1922, Bryan Manuscripts, Library of Congress.
19. Jack Mills, *The Speaking of William Jennings Bryan in Florida, 1915-1925* (M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1948), quoted 34.
20. *New York Times*, May 21, 1925; Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, 1940) is the standard account of the Presbyterian troubles.
21. *New York Times*, May 24, 1924; The British journalist, S. K. Ratcliffe, writing in *Contemporary Review*, 1925, noted that when he published an article in 1922 on America's religious difficulties, evolution was not an issue of fundamentalism at all. "When the Fundamentalist movement was originally formed," wrote William B. Riley, one of the real founders, "it was supposed that our particular foe was the so-called 'higher criticism,' but in the onward going affairs, we discovered that basal to the many forms of modern infidelity is the philosophy of evolution." *The Fundamentalist Magazine*, I (September, 1927), 8.
22. A. C. Dixon to WJB, January 5, 1923; T. C. Horton to WJB, September 15, 1923; J. W. Porter to WJB, April 14, 1923, Bryan Manuscripts, Library of Congress.
23. *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church* (April-May-June, 1923); WJB to W. B. Riley, March 27, 1925, Bryan Manuscripts, Library of Congress.
24. WJB to W. B. Riley, May 3, 1923, *Ibid.*
25. F. T. Boyer, editor, *Bible Champion*, to WJB, *Ibid.*
26. WJB to J. F. Norris, May 1, 1923; W. B. Riley to WJB, February 7, 1923; W. J. Gray to WJB, March 2, 1923; J. F. Norris to WJB, May 30, 1923; J. F. Norris to WJB, April 24, 1923, *Ibid.*
27. J. H. Larson to WJB, January 28, 1922; J. H. Larson to WJB, January 1922; J. H. Larson to WJB, January 10, 1922; W. E. Biederwolf to WJB, December 9, 1921; WJB to J. H. Larson, January 28, 1922, *Ibid.*

28. From Bryan's speech as quoted in the *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church* (Oct.-Nov.-Dec., 1925), 26; W. H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and the Social Gospel," *Journal of American History*, LIII (June, 1966), 41-61; Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 251-253, 358-365.

29. R. D. Owen, "The Significance of the Scopes Trial," *Current History*, XXII (September, 1925, 811; J. R. Straton, "Is Our Modern Educational System Developing a Race of Materialists, Sensualists, and Unbelievers?" Folder, Evangelical, of the John R. Straton manuscripts, to be deposited in the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, New York. On the trial itself, see J. T. Scopes, *Center of the Storm* (New York, 1967) and Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever* (Boston, 1958). The play by Jerome Lawrence and R. E. Lee, *Inherit the Wind*, is the version of the story which has received the most publicity, but it is not totally fair to Bryan. J. C. Edwards, "Bryan's Role in the Evolution Controversy" (M.A. Thesis, University of Georgia, 1966); Ferenc M. Szasz, "The Scopes Trial in Perspective," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXX (Fall, 1971).

30. Dennis Brogan, *American Aspects* (New York, 1964), 91.

31. *Utica (New York) Press*, July 29, 1925.

32. G. O. Griffith, "William Jennings Bryan," *Watchman-Examiner*, August 20, 1925, 1037.

33. *Albany (New York) News*, July 27, 1925.

34. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1925.

35. *The Fundamentalist*, December 6, 1925; *Washington Post*, July 30, 1925.

36. See especially William J. Bryan to his son, June 17, 1925, Bryan Manuscripts, Occidental College.

37. *Chicago Daily News*, August 18, 1925; *Cf. Manila Times*, September 8, 1928.

38. *Watchman-Examiner*, September 3, 1925, 1131.

39. Callahan to Mark Sullivan, August 8, 1925, in the Josephus Daniels papers, Library of Congress.