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Edward J. Larson. *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. x + 318. \$14.95 (paper).

[1] Like the Galileo affair, the Scopes trial has become a cultural icon in the United States for the relationship between science and religion, and the icon suggests that relationship is one of ongoing tension, clash and conflict. And like the Galileo affair, the general public perception of the Scopes trial is filled with misconceptions. The popular image for both of these iconic events is roughly along these lines: the freedom of scientists to propose and defend new theories was challenged by authoritarian religious and political institutions rooted in old, tradition-bound, dogmatic theories.

[2] Edward Larson's *Summer for the Gods* proposes to correct this popular image with respect to the Scopes trial. His project provides a timely complement to the many recent books which have done the same for the Galileo affair (I especially recommend Michael Sharratt, *Galileo: Decisive Innovator* [Cambridge University Press, 1994]).

[3] The events leading up to the trial, the trial itself, and its aftermath are a fascinating story. Larson tells this gripping and in many ways quirky story well. But the second part of the subtitle of the book - "America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion," is misleading. Larson does add a short chapter at the end about current evolution-religion controversies, but these controversies hardly encompass the broader debates about science and religion.

[4] But the story of the trial and its aftermath is enough for a wonderful read. Here are the outlines of the tale. Fundamentalism gained its name and institutional focus from a series of booklets entitled *The Fundamentals* published under the direction of A.C. Dixon, with contributions from many authors, between 1910 and 1915. In 1925, two national fundamentalist leaders, Billy Sunday and J. Frank Norris, stopped in Nashville and held an eighteen day crusade against evolution. Shortly after, and under the influence of this crusade, the Tennessee legislature passed a bill making the teaching of evolution in public schools in the State illegal. Immediately after the law was passed, the American Civil Liberties Union offered to defend any Tennessee teacher who challenged the law, and asked for a volunteer.

[5] Dayton was an economically declining town of 1800 in Eastern Tennessee, and its civic boosters were looking for some way to attract attention to their community and thereby promote an economic revival. Several businessmen and civic boosters, meeting one day in the local drug store, hatched the idea of challenging the anti-evolution statute. They needed a teacher who would be the token plaintiff. John Scopes was a single, twenty-four year old general science instructor and part-time football coach at the local high school. He normally taught physics and math, but in the spring of 1925 was temporarily filling in for the regular biology teacher. The civic boosters called Scopes to the drug store and asked if he would be willing to be the plaintiff. He had little to lose, especially since he had no intention of staying in Dayton. When he agreed, one of those present swore out a warrant for Scopes' arrest, a constable served the papers, and one of Scopes' best friends, a local lawyer, said he would prosecute the case. All were friends. After the paperwork was finished, Scopes went off to play a game of tennis while one of member of the drugstore conspiracy called the ACLU in New York. The boosters could never have imagined how successful their publicity stunt would be.

[6] Shortly after, William Jennings Bryan volunteered his services for the prosecution. Bryan was well-known, a thrice-defeated Democratic candidate for president of the United States. He held strong anti-evolutionist views. Upon hearing of Bryan's entry into the case, Clarence Darrow, a well-known defender of radical labor leaders, volunteered his services to the ACLU in defense of Scopes. Darrow was an almost pure Enlightenment figure plunked into the United States in the early 20th century. He was hostile to religion and appealed to science as an objective arbitrator of truth, although he was almost wholly ignorant of the science of his day. Larson suggests that Darrow embraced the theory of evolution not because he thought it was scientifically sound, but because it served his anti-religious viewpoint (73).

[7] The civic boosters could not have scripted a better play. Everything fell into place. William Jennings Bryan, a famous politician with leanings toward religious fundamentalism, would enter combat with the anti-religious defender of radical causes, Clarence Darrow. When the trial opened in July of 1925, the town overflowed with reporters and the curious. Dayton opened a temporary tourist camp on vacant land, the local hotel put cots in the hallways, the Southern Railway added extra passenger service, the courtroom was given a fresh coat of paint, and a storage loft in the hardware store was turned into a press center.

[8] Bryan planned to call scientists as witnesses at the trial to challenge the scientific basis of evolution, but he failed to find any scientists willing to testify. So he changed his strategy. He decided to avoid debates about the scientific status of evolution and make the pivotal issue of the trial local control of public schools. The people of Tennessee paid taxes for their public schools and accordingly they ought to have control over the curriculum. But this defense did not prevent Bryan from offering long arguments about the dire moral consequences of the theory of evolution (e.g. it encourages "animalistic behavior").

[9] Darrow and his defense team also planned to call scientists as expert witnesses. But the judge did not allow this, arguing that the trial was not about the truth or falsity of the scientific theory of evolution. The judge did allow written statements from scientific experts and the defense submitted 60,000 words of such testimony. But the main defense argument

was that the anti-evolution statute was illegal because it established a particular religious viewpoint in the public schools.

[10] After an eleven-day trial, which was covered on the front pages of all major newspapers in the United States, the jury took nine minutes to find Scopes guilty. The judge imposed the minimum fine of \$100, which the ACLU promptly paid. Five days after the trial, Bryan collapsed and died in Dayton.

[11] The ACLU appealed the Dayton verdict in 1926. The defense brief argued that the anti-evolution statute unreasonably restrained individual liberty of teachers and students by establishing a preference in public education for particular religious beliefs. The lawyers for the State of Tennessee stuck with Bryan's argument that what is taught in public schools should be a matter of local control. At the end of 1926, the Tennessee Supreme Court handed down its decision. It reversed the conviction of Scopes, but on the narrow technicality that the judge at the trial had imposed the fine whereas the jury should have done so. Clearly, the Tennessee Supreme Court justices wanted to get out of what they called "this bizarre case" without establishing any general principles.

[12] A considerable mythology grew up around the trial. Larson covers this well; I will mention only the most prominent source of the myths, the play and later movie, *Inherit the Wind*. In the 1955 play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, Scopes is hauled out of the classroom and languishes in prison, and Bryan is a mindless reactionary swayed by the mob's desire for blood. The 1960 movie with the same title was only slightly less outrageous in its redoing of history. Larson acutely observes that "*Inherit the Wind* dramatically illustrates why so many Americans continue to believe in the mythical war between science and religion" (242).

[13] Here is a brief list of some of the myths surrounding the trial and Larson's deconstruction of these myths.

1. That Darwin's theory was excluded from high school textbooks from the publication of the *Origin* until the mid-20th century. In fact, the theory was incorporated into textbooks during the late 19th century, albeit often with a theistic or Lamarckian twist (23). Later in the 19th century, the textbook presentation of the theory became more distinctly Darwinian. It was not until the fundamentalist movement gained strength in the early 1920s that attempts were made to restrict the teaching of evolution in elementary and secondary schools, and it was largely as a consequence of the trial that high school biology textbooks began to talk about Darwinian evolution as merely hypothetical and only one among several theories of origins.
2. That William Jennings Bryan, the lead attorney for the prosecution at the trial, was a provincial, narrow-minded, ill-educated politician from Nebraska. He was from Nebraska, but none of the other stereotypes about him are true. He was elected to Congress at the age of 30; became known as one of Congress's greatest orators; and was the Democratic nominee for president three times. He almost won the first campaign. He strongly opposed America's venture into empire-building and the militarism of the Spanish-American War, became secretary of state in the Woodrow Wilson administration and during his term negotiated a series of international treaties

- designed to avert another war. He resigned when the U.S. entered WWI. He moved to Florida for his wife's health and promptly became a millionaire in real estate dealings. He was not a hard-core biblical fundamentalist. In fact, he did not adhere to a literalist interpretation of Genesis. He allowed for extended geologic history. He was even open to evolution of most life forms. He dug in his heels regarding the evolution of humans (40).
3. That opposition to the theory of evolution from religious communities was almost unanimous. On the contrary, even in Tennessee, a significant number of clergy, principally Presbyterian (Bryan's affiliation) and Methodist, opposed the Tennessee legislation. There was even opposition to the anti-evolution legislation from clergy within Tennessee. After the Tennessee house and senate passed the bill, the Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee and the Dean of Fisk University, a black clergyman, asked the governor to veto the bill.
 4. That Scopes was a young scientist committed to the advance of science and to science education, and that he intentionally lectured on evolution and was then arrested. In fact, he was more interested in sports than science. Only after he was approached by his friends who wished to challenge the law, did he agree to be the plaintiff. And it was only after he had agreed, that his friends asked him whether he had discussed evolution in his classes. When he indicated that he had, his friends went through the ritual of arresting him. He then went off to play tennis.
 5. That the Scopes trial was the beginning of the decline of Fundamentalism in the United States. Frederick Lewis Allen in his 1931 bestseller, *Only Yesterday*, proposed that the Scopes trial was a critical watershed, after which Fundamentalism went into decline. Richard Hofstadter in his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* written in 1963 defends the same thesis. In fact, Fundamentalism moved in new directions - it became more inward looking, started its own colleges and publishing houses - but it continued to play a strong role in American society and continues to this very day.

[14] Larson focuses on the story and he covers it with a novelist's flair. If there is any weakness of the book, it is the failure to go into any depth on either science or theology. He does not discuss the status of Darwin's theory within the scientific community in the 1920s. And other than a perfunctory account of the beginning of Fundamentalism in the 1910s, he does not explore the social and historical roots of this movement. Why is the acceptance of evolution by some religious communities such a large issue in the United States but not in western Europe (except where exported by American religious figures)? In addition, since the Scopes trial and its aftermath was in part about a conflict between scripture and science, one would expect that something would be said about the revolution in scripture scholarship that has occurred in the 20th century and that, indeed, was underway during the Scopes trial. Larson appears to be unaware of this other revolution.

[15] The entire evolution-religion conflict has been a tragedy for those who regard religious commitment as an essential part of what it means to be fully human and those who regard theology as a serious cognitive enterprise. Those who oppose evolution on religious grounds have created an image of religion and theology as anti-science and anti-intellectual. In their attempts to defend religion and Christianity, they have in fact done it a grave disservice. On

the other side, those who have been most vocal in defending science against this fundamentalist assault have often done so out of a general hostility to religion. The resulting popular image is that these two positions are inimical and that one must choose one or the other. But there is a great middle ground between these two, which historically was the mainstream position and continues to be today.

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