

# William Jennings Byrant's defense of the Bible in John Scopes trial and Henry Lou...

[History](#)



William Jennings Byrant's defense of the Bible in John Scopes Trial and Henry Louis Menken's view on the dangers of fundamentalism: Why do you think William Jennings Bryant agreed to testify? How serious do you think Mencken was about the danger of fundamentalism? The Scopes Monkey Trial, formally known as *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* trial, is a watershed event in the history of American justice system. A Tennessee high school science teacher John Scopes was brought to court for violating the state's Butler Act which prohibited teaching about the theory of evolution. Although Scopes was found guilty and later let free on technical grounds, the case was still seen by liberal Americans as the first of many battles against fundamental Christianity in the country. (Marcus & Burner, 2010, p. 149) The prominent Democratic politician William Jennings Bryan represented the prosecution whereas the reputed defense attorney Clarence Darrow represented Thomas Scopes. A key passage in the trial was when William Jennings Bryant was brought to examination as a witness by Clarence Darrow. This unconventional move happened on the seventh day of the trial. Historians have presented different rationale for why Bryan agreed to be examined, but it is clear that he thought it would allow him to examine Darrow in turn. Darrow's questions to Bryan are part of legend today, as they tried to discredit some of the assumptions and beliefs underlying Christian theology. (Marcus & Burner, 2010, p. 151) A prime focus of this interview was the question of Adam and Eve. By pointing to logical flaws in the story of Adam and Eve, Darrow was showing to the jury that they were no more than mythologies. It was at this juncture that the classic exchange between the two counsels's ensued, with Darrow telling Bryan " You insult every man of

science and learning in the world because he does not believe in your fool religion”, to which Bryan responded that “ The reason I am answering is not for the benefit of the superior court. It is to keep these gentlemen from saying I was afraid to meet them and let them question me, and I want the Christian world to know that any atheist, agnostic, unbeliever, can question me anytime as to my belief in God, and I will answer him.” (Scopes, 1925) It is quite clear from this answer that Bryan agreed to be a witness on grounds of principle and on the basis of his deep conviction in the Christian faith. He also went on to accuse Darrow and his team of attempting to “ cast ridicule” on honest believers in the Bible. (Scopes, 1925) As the exchange between the two gentlemen got more heated, Judge Raulston was forced to adjourn the proceedings. But since the Judge believed that the examination of Bryan was irrelevant to the actual case, it was cut short and he ordered to expunge the examination from official records. But, thanks to inventive and bold journalists like H. L Mencken, most details of the trial survive to this day and have spawned more daring arguments and counterarguments from both sides in the years since. (Conkin, 1998, p. 185) Representing The Baltimore Sun, H. L. Mencken was passionately involved in the proceedings of the trial. His newspaper even sponsored some of the expenses of the defense team. Mencken believed that the jury was biased in favor of the prosecution. He puts it humorously by calling the jury “ unanimously hot for Genesis”. (Conkin, 1998, p. 185) Hence, Mencken served a role far greater than that of mere journalism, for instead of taking a neutral viewpoint he sided with the underdogs in the trial, namely the Scopes team. But his leanings were motivated by his earnest convictions and thoughtful conclusions about the

debate. He clearly foresaw the stifling effects of creationism and its associated Christian dogma upon a scientific understanding of our origins. (Conkin, 1998, p. 185) Inspired by the merits he saw in Charles Darwin's Evolution through the Theory of Natural Selection, Mencken believed that he was serving the interests of the general public by supporting critical inquiry in the classroom. Mencken has a valid point in asserting that personal religious beliefs should have no place in the education system, which should be a free and open place for rational enquiry. The dangers of fundamentalism perceived by Mencken are not out of place, for a brief look into the history of Western Civilization would reveal religious motivations behind some of the most brutal wars. Hence he believed that social divisions on religious lines as well as intolerance towards minorities and non-believers can lead to disastrous outcomes. This assessment was most shockingly proven correct by the Holocaust of the Second World War where the Roman Catholic Church supported Nazi government nearly wiped out the Jewish population of Europe. The escalating tension between America and its allies on one side and the Islamic fundamentalists on the other side in the ongoing War on Terror operations augurs badly. Hence, in conclusion, one only needs to look at human history to understand Mencken's genuine concern for the dangers posed by religious fundamentalism. Since our education system has the power to create and nourish healthy minds that are free of bigotry and prejudice, it is essential that the classroom atmosphere be free and critical debate is encouraged. The abolishing of legal restrictions with respect to teaching evolution will be a good starting point. Works Cited: Examination of Bryan by Clarence Darrow before Judge John T. Raulston and the eulogy for

Bryan by H. L. Mencken., America Firsthand Vol II, eighth edition. Authors: Robert Marcus, David Burner and Anthony 2010 pg 148-169. Conkin, Paul K. (1998), When All the Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes, and American Intellectuals, pp. 185 pp., ISBN 0847690636 Scopes, John, The World's Most Famous Court Trial, State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes: Complete Stenographic Report of the Court, ISBN 0-306-71975-4