

Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other*

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FROM THE MODERN point of view, the word "fundamentalist" conjures up a jumbled and troubling universe of connotations, clichés, images, feelings, poses, and plots: militant, strident, dogmatic, ignorant, duped, backward, rural, southern, uneducated, antiscientific, anti-intellectual, irrational, absolutist, authoritarian, reactionary, bigoted, racist, sexist, anticommunist, war mongers. You cannot reason with them. They actually believe the Bible is literally true. They are clinging to traditions. They are reacting against rapid social change. They are unfit for modern life. They are dying out. Aren't they dead yet? The preachers are in it for the money: hucksters, Elmer Gantrys, preying on the poor, the elderly, the female.

More academically, the modern voice asks: What are the social, political-economic, and cultural contexts that lead some people to react to modern life by becoming fundamentalists? What is it about the modern world, about late-capitalist culture, that enables fundamentalism to survive? How does fundamentalist discourse reproduce the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes even as it appears to reject "the modern world" those classes rule?

Fundamentalists create themselves through their own cultural practices, but not exactly as they please. They are also

constituted by modern discursive practices, an apparatus of thought that presents itself in the form of popular "stereotypes," media "images," and academic "knowledge." Singly and together, modern voices represent fundamentalists and their beliefs as an historical object, a cultural "other," apart from, even antithetical to, "modernity," which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant. Through polarities such as these between "us" and "them," the modern subject is secured.

Academic inquiry into fundamentalism is framed by modern presuppositions which presume "fundamentalists" to be a socially meaningful category of persons who are significantly homogeneous in regard to religious belief, interpretive practices, moral compass, and socioeconomic conditions, a category of persons whose behavior defies reasonable expectations and therefore needs to be—and can be—explained. The explanations, the answers to "modern" academic questions, invariably blot out fundamentalist realities and turn all born-again believers into aberrant, usually backward or hoodwinked, versions of modern subjects, who are thereby established as the neutral norm of history. Finally, the voices of modernity employ the opposition between fundamentalist and modern in history, producing a naturalizing narrative of the progressive spread of modern ideas, at times lamentably thwarted by outbursts of reactive and reactionary fundamentalist fervor.

Fundamentalists, in short, do not simply exist "out there" but are also produced by modern discursive practices. If we approach the multiple representations of fundamentalism according to modernist code, that is, literally, weighing their truth-value against some hypothetically independent realities, then we remain captive of the overarching story line of liberal progress which those representations reproduce.

If we turn our critical attention instead to that modern

apparatus of thought and read the story of fundamentalism as an intersection of discursive practices that constitute fundamentalism and fundamentalists from a modern point of view, then, interrogating representation itself, we may ask how "fundamentalism" was invented, who speaks it, what are the categories, assumptions, and trajectories implicit in its narrative representations.

These are now routine theoretical moves in studies of culture except for one thing: they are not routinely applied to specifically religious cultural "others" such as American Protestant fundamentalists. It seems that antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some "others" and not other "others"—specifically, for cultural "others" constituted by discourses of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism but not religion, at least not Christian religion. I know this from the continuous inquiry by my colleagues into my background and my motives for choosing this and not some other, any other, ethnographic object. (In effect, I am perpetually asked: Are you now or have you ever been a born-again Christian? Such queries police access to academic discourse, defining it as "modern" in the sense of secular.) I also know my intellectual tools are mismatched with my object of inquiry from my own incessant struggle not to ally with fundamentalists even as I collaborate with them in disrupting modern representations of them.

Needless to say, insofar as academic representations of fundamentalists are modern, then disrupting them may provoke charges of consorting with "them," the opponents of modernity, progress, enlightenment, truth, and reason. Shortly, I will try to enlist you as collaborators in this risky project as I renarrate the trial of John T. Scopes, this time asking how "fundamentalism" was invented, who speaks it, and what are the categories, assumptions, and trajectories embedded in its narrative representations? Implicitly, I am arguing along the way that many modernist presuppositions still operate uncritically within contemporary studies of politics and

culture, thwarting scrupulous interpretation and re-representation of some cultural "others," specifically those deemed inappropriately religious or otherwise problematic or repugnant, and generating a radically parochial imaginary of the margins in which only sanctioned cultural "others" survive.

The Book of Scopes

The centerpiece of the modern story of fundamentalism as "history" is the Scopes trial of 1925.¹ The terms within which fundamentalism came to be interpreted were not cast in that court battle for the first time, but more vividly, more widely, more sensationally, more disparagingly, more memorably than ever before. The trial produced highly charged, exfoliating representations which cycled, and continue to cycle, through journalistic and academic accounts, high-school textbooks, novels, plays, movies and TV dramas. The elements represented, like those of an origin myth, are remarkably stable,

¹ Heave an egg into the academic literature on fundamentalism and you will hit a "modern" account of the Scopes trial. Even those authored by evangelical scholars are framed by modernist presuppositions, although, as I suggest shortly, they are double-voiced in the sense that they are also marked by a critique of the modernist frame.

Major sources for this study include: Leslie H. Allen, ed., *Bryan and Darrow at Dayton: The Record of the "Bible Evolution Trial"* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967); John Thomas Scopes and James Presley, *The Center of the Storm: Memoirs of John T. Scopes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967); George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986); Norman Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); Willard B. Gatewood, *Controversy in the Twenties* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969); Jerry R. Tompkins, *D-Day at Dayton: Reflections on the Scopes Trial* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965); H. L. Mencken, *An American Scene: A Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1982); Eldred C. Vanderlaan, ed., *Fundamentalism Versus Modernism* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1925); and Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); articles in the *New York Times*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, *Bible Champion*, *Presbyterian & Herald* and *Presbyter*, and *Christian Century*; and a variety of modernist and antimodernist theological tracts by such figures as Shailer Mathews, Harry Emerson Fosdick, John Horsch, and John Roach Straton.

invariably zeroing in on the image of two big old white men arguing about the Bible in a courthouse on a sultry southern afternoon. The story may be inflected in various ways, but all accounts concur: The Bible, the old man defending it, and the fundamentalists, "lost," even though they won their case against John Scopes. In Scopes-trial histories, the word and all persons and things called "fundamentalist" are riddled with pejorative connotations, while those who interrogated the literal Bible, those who "won" the battle even though they lost their case, carry off the prestigious associations—educated, scientific, rational, progressive, urbane, tolerant, in a word, modern.

Before the Scopes trial, it was unclear which term of the binary opposition, fundamentalist/modern, would be the winner and which the loser, which was high and which was low, which term represented the universal and which the residual. During the early 1920s, two loose and fluid Protestant coalitions—most commonly dubbed liberal and conservative—fought for control over doctrinal statements, seminaries, missions, and, effectively, as it turned out, the prevailing definition of Protestant Christianity. They were, in other words, struggling to determine which view of Christianity would be hegemonic within American Protestantism. The activists in both camps were minorities who represented themselves as the center, as speaking for the majority, and both tried to stigmatize their opponents as marginal, the infiltrator, the upstart, the violator of order and all that was truly Christian.²

While some of the religious polemics of the period were

² From the conservative camp, for example, John Horsch wrote in his *Modern Religious Liberalism* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1920) that "Modernist theology discredits and destroys the foundations of Christianity as it has been known in all ages from the time of its origins" (p. 5). From the liberal camp, Shailer Mathews wrote in *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1925) that "Every age has its Modernist movement when Christian life, needing new spiritual support, has outgrown some element of ecclesiastical coercion and incarnated some new freedom of the spirit" (p. 3).

blunt and deprecatory, most were restrained and even erudite, and overall the tone was one of serious debate about matters of monumental importance. When the Reverend Curtis Lee Laws invented the term "fundamentalist" in 1920, it was taken up as an honorific by his Baptist and Presbyterian colleagues, who swore to do "battle royal for the fundamentals of the faith."³ It and the other more common labels which tagged each side acquired more unsavory connotations in the course of some very heated denominational struggles, but until the Scopes trial, neither liberal nor conservative Protestants succeeded in taking over and tainting their opponents' definitions of themselves. Each side was able to sustain its own, dialogically constructed yet relatively autonomous, version of events, its own "history" of the contest, which anticipated winning, but which could not assume, did not constitute, victory.

Alongside the intensifying denominational fights that agitated northern cities in the early 1920s, some conservative Protestant ministers allied with politicians in the south to provoke a string of legislative fights over the teaching of evolution and the status of Genesis in public schools. The political debates were more charged, more acrimonious than their religious counterparts, having been taken up, on one side, as the main battle royal of self-declared fundamentalist preachers and laymen under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan and, on the other side, by liberal lawyers, scientists, politicians, and journalists in alliance with politically outspoken liberal ministers. The legislative debates produced partial victories for fundamentalists in several states, and in 1925 Tennessee passed a law that represented full victory: evolution was cast as denying the Genesis account, thus as antibiblical and anti-Christian, and its teaching was prohibited, actually, criminalized, in schools funded by the state. In July,

³ From an editorial in *Watchman-Examiner*, July 1, 1920, by Curtis Lee Laws, quoted in a sermon he delivered at the Moody Bible Institute and reprinted in the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, September 1922.

just a few months after the law was passed, it was challenged in the trial of John T. Scopes.

Even before the Scopes trial began, it was proclaimed the decisive battle that would settle once and for all which side would win the contest between religious liberals and conservatives in both arenas of their struggle, church and state. The remarkable thing is that it did just that. All accounts agree, regardless of the point of view of the author, that the Scopes trial "climax"ed the controversy, which was thereafter known as the Fundamentalist (not the conservative Protestant, not the Modernist) controversy, and that it was a decisive "defeat" for what then came to be called the Fundamentalist Movement.⁴ Indeed, the Scopes trial was inscribed as "the end" of the movement, even though the denominational debates and legislative battles persisted for another four or five years.

After the trial a relatively unnuanced modernist construction of (what was thereafter glossed as) fundamentalism became history—without quotes. It did not abolish fundamentalist—or conservative—versions of events so much as encapsulate them. Orthodox Protestant constructions of the Scopes trial and the events of the 1920s acquired the double-voicing of the cultural "other," a kind of double vision of themselves as at once victims and critics of hegemonic insinuations, and their histories of the period were thereafter marked by an essentially modernist telos, with a sense of the inevitability of their defeat, at least on earth.⁵ Insofar as narrative encapsulation is one

⁴ According to Furniss, *Fundamentalist Controversy*, "the Scopes trial was a part, actually the climax, of the fundamentalist controversy" (p. 3). At the other end of the spectrum, Jerry Falwell with Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), represent the event in virtually the same terms: "the Fundamentalist Movement was brought to an abrupt halt in 1925 at the Scopes trial" (p. 90).

⁵ Evangelical historian George Marsden comes close to destabilizing modernist frames by concentrating on the ways in which the trial and fundamentalists were (mis)interpreted in the press, implicitly calling into question the status of the "events" as such. Marsden also argues that some fundamentalists shortly came to fulfill modernist stereotypes with a vengeance, thus fueling more ridicule and leading "moderate" orthodox Protestants to fall away. In this way, he concedes some "truth" to

marker of hegemony, then the trial, in effect, constituted the beginning of liberal Protestant hegemony.

How did the Scopes trial produce this discursive effect?

The Forces of Representation

The Scopes trial was a "representational event," a complex, multilayered, polyvocal, open-ended discursive process in which participants (including self-appointed "observers") created and contested representations of themselves, each other, and the event.

In the beginning, the arena of the trial was the constitutional challenge imagined by the national officers of the ACLU in New York City who were looking for a test case of the Tennessee law and the men of Dayton who concocted the Scopes test. Roger Baldwin, director of the ACLU, described in retrospect what happened to the contours of the case when William Jennings Bryan offered to appear as counsel for the attorney general of Tennessee:

It was immediately apparent what kind of trial it would be: the Good Book against Darwin, bigotry against science, or, as popularly put, God against the monkeys. With Bryan for the prosecution, it was almost inevitable that Clarence Darrow should volunteer for the defense. Darrow was well known as an agnostic; he frequently wrote and lectured on the subject, ridiculing many of the Old Testament myths. . . .

The legal issues faded into obscurity against the vivid advocacies of an unquestioning faith and of a rational and probing common sense. Bryan threw his challenge to the defense lawyers, stating, "These gentlemen . . . did not come here to try this case. They came here to try revealed religion. I am here to defend it. . . . I am simply trying to protect the Word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States." And Darrow replied to him. "We have the purpose of

modern stereotypes, but only after the fact of their invention. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 184ff.

preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States and you know it, and that is all.⁶

The entry of Bryan, then Darrow, to the Scopes case catapulted it into the arena of national debate over evolution and the Bible, science and religion.

Although Roger Baldwin's prose lightly slurred the pro-Bible camp, it, like virtually all accounts, set up the trial as a fair fight. Each side was represented by a nationally renowned oratorical giant. Both points of view would be articulated at their extremes, and so, it seemed, were nicely balanced and positioned to fame the event, the contest, in the most dramatically mutually exclusive terms. Bryan was prepared to convict evolution as heresy and to defend the Bible as truth; Darrow to convict the Bible as wrong and defend evolution as fact. Finally, neither man would hesitate to deploy against his adversary the powerful contextual associations presented him by the trial. Darrow might, did, use Bryan's rural, populist, southern alliances against him, but Bryan could, would, accuse Darrow and his team of Yankee interventionism and big city, fancy-credential elitism.

Everybody had a stake in the trial's looking like a fair fight between Darrow and Bryan, evolution and the Bible, science and religion—or else it could not have produced a winner and a loser—but it was not a fair fight. The sides were not equally represented; their representations were not equal in the sense that some traveled much more than others. The representations that circulated in the courtroom seemed to be equally matched; those that traveled around the town and state were tilted toward orthodoxy; but the representations that left the state and spread around the nation and abroad were all but monopolized by the proscience camp. The case against orthodoxy in the court of national public opinion was

⁶ Tompkins, *D-Day at Dayton*, pp. 57–58.

therefore just as settled before the fact by this representational imbalance as was the case against Scopes in the court of law.

The Scopes trial was a spectacular media event from the moment Bryan and Darrow signed on and converted it, in Bryan's words, into "a duel to the death" between evolution and Christianity. Radio Station WGN, an outlet of the Chicago *Tribune*, made it the occasion of the first national radio hook-up, so that news from Dayton, in the courtroom and on the streets, was broadcast live all over the country for two weeks. And then over 100, some said 200, newspaper reporters and photographers from all the big cities (two from London) descended on Dayton, a town of 1800 in the hills of Tennessee northeast of Chattanooga. No doubt many of the journalists considered themselves Christians. Some of them may even have harbored doubts about evolution, and a few wrote with sympathy for the orthodox cause. But none of them identified with the fundamentalist standard, and overall their reportage composed an unrelenting, at times unbridled, rendition of the modern voice. In the 1920s, dozens of orthodox, conservative fundamental Protestant journals and bulletins had national circulations, but they did not send "observers" to Dayton. Some did not mention the trial at all, and others described it briefly and belatedly, mainly as another instance of liberals' attacking the Bible or as the unfortunate occasion of William Jennings Bryan's death. The trial was thus constituted for most Americans by the press from the modern point of view. The fundamentalist, even the conservative, point of view, spoken in its own voices, was erased, and then reinscribed within, encapsulated by, the modern metanarrative in the "news" read, and heard, around the country and abroad.

The Main Frames and Figures

The *New York Times* on the eve of the trial set the major narrative frame by describing Scopes as "a mere figure over

which will joust the forces of evolution and religion, Fundamentalism and Modernism, liberalism and conservatism."⁷ Most of the story, however, was not concerned with such lofty issues, but rather with minutely detailed depictions of Bryan preaching "in the hills" to "plain folk" and the "cranks and freaks who flocked to Dayton" for the trial. Subsequent trial coverage bulged with such side stories—some days they seemed like the main stories—which progressively homogenized, stigmatized, and appropriated the voices of fundamentalists, the plain folk, the throngs from the hills.

That the *Times* considered itself fair-minded compared to the *Baltimore Evening Sun's* H. L. Mencken was suggested by a side story entitled "Mencken Epithets Rouse Dayton's Ire."⁸ Specifically, the *Times* reported, Daytonians were irked by Mencken's calling them gaping primates, yokels, peasants, hillbillies, Babbits, morons, and mountaineers. Mencken's pieces were indeed excessive, ribald, Rabelaisian parodies of both rural America and Protestant orthodoxy—which were almost indelibly fused in his writing. One of his stories, a rambling account of a healing revival in the hills, peaked with this description of a preacher praying for a penitent:

Words spouted out from his lips like bullets from a machine gun. . . . Suddenly he rose to his feet, threw back his head and began to speak in tongues—blub-blub-blub, gurgle-gurgle-gurgle. His voice rose to a higher register. The climax was a shrill inarticulate squawk, like that of a man throttled. He fell headlong across the pyramid of supplicants.

A comic scene? Somehow, no. The poor half wits were too horribly in earnest. It was like peeping through a knothole at the writhings of a people in pain.⁹

Back in town, and in court, focusing on the trial, Mencken was not much more restrained, spending much of his verbal excesses on Bryan—the precise details of his dress, his

⁷ *New York Times*, July 10, 1925.

⁸ *Ibid.*, July 17, 1925.

⁹ *Baltimore Sun*, July 13, 1925.

appetite, his corpulence, his somber face, his anxious glaring gaze. Darrow was, in contrast, the unembellished hero of Mencken's stories, a master in court, a source of terror in the town. "All the local sorcerers predict that a bolt from heaven will fetch him in the end."¹⁰ On the day Scopes was found guilty, Mencken summed up the trial like this:

The Scopes trial, from the start, has been carried on in a manner exactly fitted to the anti-evolution law and the simian imbecility under it. There hasn't been the slightest pretense of decorum. The rustic judge, a candidate for re-election, has postured before the yokels like a clown in a ten-cent side show, and almost every word he has uttered has been an undisguised appeal to their prejudices and superstitions. . . .

Darrow has lost the case. It was lost long before he came to Dayton. But it seems he has nonetheless performed a great public service by fighting to the finish and in a perfectly serious way. Let no one mistake it for comedy, farcical though it may be in all its details. It serves notice on the country that Neanderthal man is organizing in these forlorn backwaters of the land, led by a fanatic, rid of sense and devoid of conscience. . . .¹¹

The circus metaphor audible in Mencken's summation was widespread. It appeared in virtually all secondary accounts, and it is hard to imagine any reporter resisting it. The *New York Times* described Dayton on the eve of the trial as "half circus and half a revival meeting," and the next day as "a carnival in which religion and business had become strangely mixed."¹² Indeed, it was not entirely a metaphor. John Scopes recalled in his memoirs that "everybody was doing business" in Dayton during his trial—stores peddled monkey commodities (little cotton apes, a soda drink called Monkey Fizz, a "simian watch fob") and the streets were filled with vendors of hot dogs, lemonade, books and pamphlets, religion and biology.

There was never anything like this. It was a carnival from start

¹⁰ Tompkins, *D-Day at Dayton*, p. 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹² *New York Times*, July 10-11, 1925.

to finish. Every Bible-shouting, psalm-singing pulpit hero in the state poured out of the hills . . . and they came from outside the state too. . . . Some professional circus performers, who must have felt at home, brought two chimpanzees. The air was filled with shouting from early morning until late into the night.¹³

John Scopes's reading of the carnivalesque scene in Dayton, like Mencken's and the *Times's*, among other readings, constituted a modern voice, the modern point of view. Circus performers did appear and a carnivalesque ambience did pervade the town, but some were seen in the spectacle and others saw it. The journalists, lawyers, scientists, and otherwise liberal-minded men who flocked to Dayton were not reckoned inside the carnival, even though they were just as out of place as anyone else. They *witnessed* it. The town, and the trial, "happened to them." They were the subjects, not the objects, of their stories, of this history. The titles of Mencken's dispatches from Dayton went so far as to inscribe explicitly the events on him: "Impossibility of Obtaining Fair Jury Insures Scopes' Conviction, Mencken Says." "Yearning Mountaineers' Souls Need Reconversion Nightly, Mencken Finds."

The Last Day

While the Tennessee town and countryside seemed to present themselves to the press as a modern nightmare—as the spectacle of premodernity—the trial was more wily, harder to nail down as transparent evidence of modern superiority, at least until the last day. Mencken's final dispatch, a relatively somber meditation on the meaning of Scopes's conviction, was hardly triumphal, but then he wrote it before the last day of the trial. Mencken left early expecting that the only remaining event was the jury's inevitable guilty verdict. Indeed, part of

¹³ Scopes and Presley, *Center of the Storm*, pp. 98–99.

what made the last day so dramatic was that nobody expected it. Although Darrow and his team had obviously planned for it, they too were galvanized when Bryan accepted Darrow's request that he, Bryan, take the stand as an expert witness on the Bible. Unexpected, it was also the moment everybody had been waiting for, a duel to the death, it turned out, quite literally. Or so it seemed. All primary and secondary accounts I have examined, including those written by conservative Protestants, represent the encounter as a decisive moment in which Darrow beat Bryan, and many of the accounts suggest that it was humiliation as much as diabetes that killed Bryan in his sleep five days later. Here, briefly, is how the encounter is generally represented:

The courtroom was so crowded on the last day that the judge, fearing the building might collapse, convened court outdoors. On a platform set up for visiting revivalists, Clarence Darrow interrogated William Jennings Bryan for two hours about the precise accuracy of well-known Bible stories and about his knowledge of science and history. Bryan did not know that the "big fish" that swallowed Jonah in the Old Testament was called a "whale" in the New Testament. He did not know what would have happened to the earth if "the sun stood still," where Cain got his wife, that Bishop Ussher's chronology was a calculation, not a quotation, from the Bible, or how the serpent moved before God made it crawl on its belly. Darrow established that (the authors of the Book of) Joshua believed the sun revolved around the earth, yet Bryan acknowledged that he believed the earth revolved around the sun. In what became the most notorious exchange, Darrow led Bryan six times to say that he did not think the six "days" of creation were "necessarily" twenty-four-hour days.

Darrow spliced his biblical thrusts with inquiries that impugned Bryan's knowledge, indeed, his intelligence, repeatedly inducing Bryan to confess his ignorance of scholarly knowledge. The interrogation concluded with the following exchange:

Mr. Bryan—Your Honor, I think I can shorten this testimony. The only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slur at the Bible, but I will answer his questions. . . . I want the world to know that this man, who does not believe in God, is trying to use a court in Tennessee—

Mr. Darrow—I object to that.

Mr. Bryan—to slur at it, and, while it will require time, I am willing to take it.

Mr. Darrow—I object to your statement. I am examining you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes.¹⁴

Darrow and Bryan were at this point both standing and shaking their fists at each other; the judge abruptly adjourned court until the next morning. Many spectators, including townspeople who had previously cheered Bryan on, thronged around Darrow to congratulate him on his performance. Bryan, left alone, watched and waited until a few people broke away from the crowd and spoke to him. If Bryan thought Darrow had beaten him, he never admitted it, not even to his wife. Five days later he died during an afternoon nap.

My narrative drift figures the climactic encounter in the courthouse as Bryan's defeat, but it could be re-presented as his victory: As the occasion of a man's standing up publicly for the Bible, for God, taking upon himself the ridicule and scorn of all unbelievers; as an unambiguous demonstration that evolutionary thought was an attack on true Christianity, on Bible believers. Darrow could be cast as a shameless man who "hated" the Bible, a bigot who mocked the common man and persecuted the Great Commoner. Bryan could be etched in our memories as a hero who exposed a villain. At the end of the Scopes trial, and at several points during it, Bryan seemed to be constructing himself and the event in these terms, but no one else took up his story line.¹⁵

¹⁴ Allen, *Bryan and Darrow*, pp. 156–157.

¹⁵ When I sketched this reframing of Bryan's performance—as it might have been rendered from a fundamentalist point of view that resisted modernist insinuations—it was purely imaginary. Since then, the encounter between Bryan and Darrow has been

Of course, proscience and proreligion accounts inflected the events of the last days of the trial differently. Modern voices construed them most literally, as bearing intrinsic, obvious meanings—namely, that Darrow beat Bryan because science is superior to religion; that the truth simply won out; that Darrow revealed Bryan's ignorance and quite properly found the Bible guilty of not representing reality. Even Bryan admitted, so the modern story goes, that the Bible could not be, word for word, literally true, and his death proved that he knew he was wrong, profoundly outwitted and outmoded, whether he admitted it or not. The people of Dayton even recognized the truth. *The New York Times* reported:

These Tennesseans were enjoying a fight. That an ideal of a great man, a biblical scholar, an authority on religion, was being dispelled seemed to make no difference. They grinned with amusement and expectation, until the next blow by one side or the other came, and then they guffawed again. And finally, when Mr. Bryan, pressed harder and harder by Mr. Darrow, confessed he did not believe everything in the Bible should be taken literally, the crowd howled.¹⁶

Pro-Bible narratives of the interrogation usually passed over the details and moved on to discuss the way the encounter was represented in the newspapers and the extent to which journalists, in their stories, converted a bad situation into a rout. According to Reverend R. M. Ramsay, writing for the *Presbyterian & Herald and Presbyter* in August of 1925:

When the trial was over, and everyone saw that the [Scopes's conviction] was just as every sensible, unbiased judge who knew

so reinscribed by Gary Wills in *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 97–114. Wills casts Darrow and Mencken as consciously collaborating in a social Darwinist plot to discredit fundamentalism by "diabolizing" Bryan, whom Wills figures as the benign, unassuming, well-intentioned victim. Wills concludes that the Scopes trial did not represent the triumph of evolution. On the contrary, "Just as the lawyers and journalists left Dayton, laughing and congratulating themselves that they had slain fundamentalism, the teaching of evolution was starting its decline in America, one from which it would not recover until the 1960s" (p. 113).

¹⁶ *New York Times*, July 21, 1925.

the facts knew it would turn out, then the newspaper reporters raised a great noise of ridicule about the awful scene when Lawyer Darrow questioned Mr. Bryan about his beliefs. . . .¹⁷

Reverend Ramsay described Darrow's line of questioning as "repulsive, abusive, ignorant, tiresome twaddle about Bible questions that no true student of God's Holy Word would ever think fit to answer."

Reverend Ramsay's voice was savvy and hostile but nonetheless presupposed Bryan's defeat and hence collaborated in constructing the trial as a modernist victory. Modern accounts of the Scopes trial, no matter how gloating or unself-critical, could not by themselves have constituted the trial as literally meaning the triumph of modernity. Fundamentalists read the trial, specifically Darrow's interrogation, in essentially the same way, and it was the overlap, the convergence of the two story lines, that produced the sensation that the modern version of events had literally come true. Bryan lost in terms of fundamentalist expectations because he failed to defend the Bible according to code, which required active, aggressive Bible quoting, an ability to parry all "infidel objections" and "standard village atheist questions," and, finally, a willingness to assert that every claim, every word, every dot and tittle, in the Bible was literally true. In each respect, Bryan broke the pose of absolute biblical literalism, and that amounted to his publicly betraying fundamentalism as well as the Bible, Christianity and God.

The point is not that fundamentalists could have interpreted events some other way but that, given their narrative constraints, they could not have interpreted events any other way. Certainly not after Bryan said the days of Genesis might not have been literally twenty-four-hour days. With that exchange, Darrow robbed Bryan of the very ground upon which he spoke—Bryan, it turned out to the amazement of all, was not even a fully formed biblical literalist.

¹⁷ *Presbyterian & Herald and Presbyter*, Aug. 6, 1925, p. 14.

That might well have been enough to have rendered the trial a defeat in fundamentalist eyes, but then Bryan died, definitely extinguishing any residual hope that he might recoup his loss to Darrow and providing, as deaths do, an ultimate sense of ending. A story takes shape in relation to its ending, the end point from which to look back upon events as if they had led up to it. (Imagine, for example, how the story of the Scopes trial would have changed for both sides had Bryan survived and Darrow been struck by lightning on his way home from the trial.) Bryan's death figured as the last event in fundamentalist as well as modern accounts of the Scopes trial, and most narrators elaborated it as unambiguous "evidence" of Bryan's loss, his utter humiliation. Darrow's words, it seemed, were deadly. Bryan had, it appeared, internalized the stigma, and it killed him. Insofar as Bryan stood for fundamentalism, his death also marked the definitive end of the movement.

Darrow's interrogation of Bryan was spellbinding and, joined with Bryan's timely death, positively mythic because of the narrative fusion that occurred in its wake, indeed, seemed even to occur in the event itself. It was the moment in which "fundamentalists" got caught up in the modernist narrative. They were captured by its terms; the modernist story encapsulated their story. It was the moment when fundamentalists saw themselves, as well as were seen, as acting out, in the body of William Jennings Bryan, modernist preconceptions and scenarios. In effect, under the sign "fundamentalist," Protestants who believed the Bible was true were "othered," internally "orientalized," not simply in the numerous accounts of the trial that poured out for years afterward, but in the event itself. Fundamentalists were othered *"live"* in the Scopes trial. They were present and participated in the event which stigmatized them, cast them out of public life, marked them as a category of inferior persons whose very existence required explanation. The event also, of course, constituted, in and after the fact, an apotheosis of the modern gaze, its authorial

point of view, its knowing voice, its teleological privilege, its right to exist without explanation.

Opening Up

I have refused a literal reading of the Scopes trial as “the moment in which fundamentalism was defeated” and instead interrogated representations of the trial as discursive productions of “fundamentalists” and their “defeat” in order to open up a space in which other accounts, not only of the trial but of “fundamentalism,” might emerge.

Opening up that space also entails resisting a series of related moves currently common in the academic literature on fundamentalism, because they too serve, often contrary to their authors’ good intentions, the modernist project of essentializing Bible-believing Protestants. It is not enough to criticize popular stereotypes, media images, and academic portraits of fundamentalists as “inaccurate” and to “correct” them, for that only revalidates the category. It is not enough to say that earlier predictions of a modern secular society and the death of Bible belief were greatly exaggerated, for that simply modifies the story, conserving its modernist telos. It is not enough to say that fundamentalists are really in many ways modern, or are really allies of modern ruling elites, and that modern society is not after all really so secular (that is, to qualify the binary opposition by recognizing the presence of the “other” in each category), for, again, the hierarchical opposition, the story it employs, and the points of view engendered remain essentially intact.

The point is not to revise, and thereby reproduce, the modernist story of fundamentalism. Nor is it to abolish that story, to pretend it does not exist, to investigate Bible-believing Protestants as if the modern apparatus of thought which makes them their object had no constitutive force. The point is precisely to problematize that apparatus, its representations,

and its constitutive power as a hegemonic discourse which directly defines and dialogically generates its "other," and then to investigate that which is called "fundamentalism" in that context.

Bible-belief is not an invention of modern discourses, but fundamentalism is. Fundamentalism is a part of modernism's history, not something outside of it, alien and anachronistic. It is not a dead or dying phenomenon, not an essentialized, oddly enduring, thing stuck in the past, but a multifarious outcome of on-going discursive contests. And the power of so-called fundamentalists during the 1980s was not a direct, literal, objective expression of their numbers or their actions, but was, like the Scopes trial and the "fundamentalist controversy" of the 1920s, a modern discursive production, for neither their numbers nor their actions had meaning, much less power, apart from how they figured in the modern imaginary.

The problem with renarrating fundamentalists as a backward cultural "other" whose exclusion enables and secures a hegemonic "modern" point of view is that it places them in the same conceptual and political space—the vaunted margins—as women, gays, ethnic and racial minorities, workers, tribal and peasant peoples, the colonized and the postcolonials. I say it is a problem because it provokes a chain of differentiating rhetorical moves in me and in my audiences, moves that would at least assure us that fundamentalists are "less oppressed" than other "others," and at best expose them as impostors who are not really oppressed at all and who therefore belong in the center, not the margins. Once again, I want to resist such moves and instead to interrogate "the margins" and "the oppressed." Why are the margins in studies of culture not occupied equally by politically sympathetic and repugnant cultural "others"? Why do we constantly segregate and rank them so unself-critically in our conversations, our publications, our conferences and panels?

Opening up the cultural margins by recognizing and critically rehabilitating our own oppositional "others" might

seem to slide necessarily into a polemic on behalf of pluralism, moral relativism, and tolerance of diversity, but I think, on the contrary, that deregulating the margins makes those liberal notions painfully unsustainable.

Political judgment and will are not neutralized by understanding fundamentalism as one of modernism's "others." In fact, our sense of political choice is sharpened by deconstructing the totalizing opposition between "us" and "them," because who "we" are no longer depends on notions that assume we already know who "they" are. We—situated, implicated, and self-reflexive—can then come up with more nuanced, complicated, partial, and local readings of who they are and what they are doing and therefore design more effective political strategies to oppose directly the specific positions and policies they advocate. This seems to me better politics than one grounded in a totalizing or uncritical opposition between fundamentalist and modern.

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