

## Inherit the Wind: A Lesson in Distorting History

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### Abstract

The history, contents, and specific sections of the popular play titled *Inherit the Wind*, which purports to be a replay of the Scopes Trial, are reviewed. Although the play was widely believed to be an accurate synopsis of the historical trial, often called the Trial of the Century, it grossly distorted the actual events of history. A number of documented examples are provided to illustrate this now well-supported conclusion of skewed history.

**Keywords:** Scopes Trial, Creation evolution controversy, teaching creation, education, separation of church and state, anti-Christian propaganda

### Introduction

The Scopes Trial, often called the Trial of the Century, is the most famous confrontation between creationists and evolutionists. The trial involved a challenge by the ACLU to a law passed in Tennessee that forbid teachers to teach as fact the idea that humans evolved from lower primates (Johnson 2001). The trial challenged the Butler Act which specifically stated that

it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals (Butler 1925).

William Jennings Bryan defended the act, which had passed in the Tennessee House of representatives by a 71 to 5 vote (Larson 1997, p. 50). Agnostic attorney Clarence Darrow defended John Thomas Scopes who volunteered to test the constitutionality of the act.

The Butler Act was named after John W. Butler, a Democrat who believed that public schools should promote citizenship and morality based on Judeo-Christian values. Because Butler believed that Darwinism hurt this goal, the act was designed to forbid only the teaching of human evolution. The Butler Act was just one of many laws attempting to limit or forbid the teaching of evolution. Bryan, on the other hand, saw the law more as a means of dealing with the problem of anti-religious indoctrination (Trial Transcript, p. 323). This is the same concern with the modern creation-evolution controversy.

Critics and supporters both agree that the Lawrence and Lee play *Inherit the Wind* is the “single most influential retelling” of the Scopes Trial (Alters 1995).

Much of the inflammatory rhetoric in the play came from H. L. Mencken, the “most famous newspaperman in American History” whose caustic comments found their way into hundreds of publications, many which are still in print today (Mencken 2007). The play/movie is primarily about the creation versus evolution controversy.

From about the mid-1960s to today, both are used specifically to marginalize a creationist worldview. Putatively written to respond to the “threat to intellectual freedom” that some people believed existed during the so-called McCarthy era, the focus of the play is on mocking creationists (Moore 1998, p. 487). The distorted portrayal of the attorney defending the Butler act, Bryan, and the portrayal of Christians are secondary, but are still important to the implied message that the creation worldview is erroneous, and the evolution worldview valid. Most commentaries on the play/movie make much of this distortion, but few have thoroughly examined its important propaganda use in the creation versus evolution debate.

The Scopes Trial is one of three important perceived clashes between science and religion, the Galileo affair and the Wilberforce versus Huxley debate being the other two. All three have been exploited by opponents of Christianity, and all three events, as commonly presented, are distorted and twisted retellings of the actual events (Bergman 2010). The Scopes Trial is perhaps the most enduring of the three because it occurred more recently than the Galileo and Wilberforce events, and much more has been written about it.

The large number of showings of the movie and productions of the plays, both in the United States and internationally, is one good reason for an objective review of the play/movie. The play/movie is especially relevant today in view of the worldwide 2009 Charles

Darwin celebrations—due to the fact that Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, or 150 years ago. A large number of Darwin celebrations have included showings of the 1960 movie and/or productions of the play. Of note is that the United Artist marketing department timed their 1960 release of the movie with the 1959 celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's *Origins* book.

### The Play Opens

The three act blockbuster play, written by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, first opened on January 10, 1955 in Dallas, Texas with local unknown actors, then on Broadway in April 1955 with well-known actors. When the Broadway run ended in 1957, *Inherit the Wind* was one of the most successful and longest running dramas in American history. It had 806 performances from April 1955 to June 1957 alone, and it is still playing in various cities around the world.

One reason for the play's success was because the Academy Award winner George C. Scott played the role of Scopes lead attorney Clarence Darrow. The play's run was extended partly because Scott caused a delay in the play's opening, and the play closed prematurely because Scott became ill and was then facing a sexual-harassment lawsuit (Arena and Kennedy 1996, p. 1).

The play was later made into a movie for both television and the big screen. The success and reputation of theatrical and movie productions are often based on the actors involved, and the actors in *Inherit the Wind* include such well-known film stars as George C. Scott, Jack Lemmon, Tony Randall, Spencer Tracy, Kirk Douglas, Gene Kelly, Darren McGavin, Jason Robards, Abe Vigoda, Paul Muni, and Ed Begley. The movie was also premiered at both the 1960 International Berlin Film Festival and in London, before being shown in the United States. Releases in seven other European countries soon followed the U.S. release.

The first movie was released in 1960 and starred Spencer Tracy as Darrow and Gene Kelly as Mencken. The two-hours long black and white production was also the world's first airline in-flight movie. The movie garnered four Academy Award nominations, including best actor (Spencer Tracy). At least four made-for-television productions were also completed. These include a 1965 version that starred John Randolph, Melvyn Douglas and Murray Hamilton, a 1988 NBC production starring Kirk Douglas and Darren McGavin (Moore 1998, p. 487), and a 1999 full color theater version starring George C. Scott and Jack Lemmon. One reviewer noted when the play was staged in his city that it

was originally scheduled to run only to April 14; however, with the reviews having been favorable and the attendance large, the run has been extended. On the Thursday evening I attended, the 1081-seat house was full, with Scott receiving a standing ovation during his curtain call. I much preferred this stage production to the film representations and heartily recommend the experience to all (Alters 1995, p. 34).

The influence of both the play and film was enormous, but the film was more effective in leaving people with the impression that Bryan, and by extension, all Christians, are uneducated ignorant bumpkins. The play, though, gives information not found in the film because the script used to produce the play provides explicit instructions about scenery, backdrops, and how actors are to express themselves—and as a result the author's intent is more readily discerned.

Movies, though, have the clear advantage of portability—they can be shown in schools, homes, churches and community groups. A play requires a lot more work and finances to produce. That both have won awards lends credibility to the effectiveness of the production and motivates new showings and productions. Critics of the play, who had hoped that the film version would correct the “many errors” in the play, were very disappointed and, if anything, it was worse (Goette 1991).

### The Play is Fiction

Most viewers assume that the popular play/movie tells the true story of the famous 1925 anti-evolution trial involving teacher John Scopes (Larson 1997). For example, one review described the play as follows:

Although the events of the play “*Inherit the Wind*” took place in the early part of the 20th century, the conflict between logic and emotion is just as timely today as it was during the famous Scopes trial in 1925. The names of the characters have been changed but events follow closely the story of a teacher who was jailed for teaching evolution (Flint 1994).

In fact, *Inherit the Wind* is a distortion of most all of the actual events and characters involved in the Scopes Trial. The play openly mocks theism, religion, the South, William Jennings Bryan, and even religious pluralism.

Among the play's misleading or openly wrong claims includes intentionally casting Bryan as an ultra-religious right-wing fanatic. In fact, Bryan was actually a theological conservative but a liberal Democrat and supported many Democrat Party goals, including an increase in the regulatory power of the federal government (Iannone 1997; Kazin 2006). In an extensive study of Bryan, historian Robert Linder summarized how Bryan's public image was successfully altered by the popular media:

After 1925 the notion that Bryan and Fundamentalism stood for bigotry and ignorance grew until it became the accepted view. Bryan, the shining knight of Progressivism, now wore badly tarnished armor. Over the years novels, essays, and poems, and *Inherit the Wind* helped sustain the myth (Lindner 1975, p. 9).

The actual court transcript and most Bryan historians have effectively falsified the playwrights' attempt to picture Bryan as a narrow-minded right-wing bigot. Even some of Bryan's more informed enemies have been forced to admit that Bryan manifested a

praiseworthy tolerance towards those who disagreed with him.... Bryan was the greatest American orator of his time, or perhaps of any time. As a speaker, Bryan radiated good humored sincerity. Few who heard him could help liking him.... In personality he was forceful, energetic, and opinionated but also genial, kindly, generous, likable and charming (de Camp 1968, pp. 36–37).

Calling Dayton, Tennessee—and by inference the South—“narrow minded” as the play does, reflects both much ignorance and prejudice about Dayton, the South, and the motivations of those involved on both sides of the origins debate. Furthermore, Scopes was not jailed for teaching evolution as the play claimed, nor did he teach biology or evolution; he was a coach who taught math and general science (Scopes and Presley 1967). This fact didn't seem to matter to the ACLU and Darrow. Furthermore, as a result of the trial Scopes received free graduate education at the University of Chicago, and the evolutionists helped him in his career until he retired (Larson 1997).

*Inherit the Wind* mentioned three experts including a “famous scientist” (such as Columbia University Professor Joseph Wood Krutch) who it was implied, were not allowed to present “true science” in court. If presented today in open court, the evidence that the scientists were going to present back then would be enormously embarrassing for the evolutionists.

Most of this evidence was never presented in court but did become part of the official court record. Zoologist Maynard Metcalf testified at length, but not with the jury present because the jury's only responsibility was to determine if Scopes broke the law. Some argue that Darrow did not want the evidence prepared by the scientists presented in open court thus preventing Bryan and his team from cross-examining the scientists. The evolutionists evidently did not want to be cross-examined because they knew that their evidence for Darwinism could be challenged.

In debates with Bryan before the trial, president of the American Museum of Natural History Henry Fairfield Osborn used *Hesperopithecus* (often called Nebraska Man), a fossil based on a single tooth, as

evidence of human evolution (Osborn 1925). The latter fossil was alleged by some prominent scientists to be valid evidence of evolution, but was eventually proven to be the tooth of an extinct pig (Bergman 1993).

The primary end goal of the trial was to overturn the law and achieve publicity in favor of evolution and against creation. As a result, they agreed to submit affidavits that became part of the court record (Perloff 1999, pp. 203–204). The evidence actually presented in the documents submitted by the scientists to the court included Java man, vestigial organs, and Haeckel's theory of embryonic recapitulation, all of which have now been thoroughly discredited (Bergman 2003). The evidence also included both discredited ideas and fossils, including Piltdown Man, now known to be a forgery (see page 237 of the Trial Transcript and Bergman, 2003, for a review of the Piltdown affair).

The result of their not testifying likely helped Darrow's position. Far from being excluded, as the play infers, this evidence occupies 54 pages of the printed trial transcript and resulted in a one-sided presentation in favor of evolution that has now been publicized world-wide. Many concluded that, as a result, evolution lost the legal case but won in the court of public opinion (Perloff 1999, pp. 203–204).

### The Science Facts Irrelevant

Supporters of the play often argue that, because it is openly a work of fiction, the facts about the trial are irrelevant. In response to this claim, Professor Menton concludes that:

Theatrical liberties were exercised in developing the plot, but occasional courtroom exchanges were taken word-for-word from the transcript of the Scopes trial. Unfortunately, the composite that resulted has become widely perceived as an historical account of the trial. But the play is **not** a fair and accurate representation of the great battle of ideas and beliefs that was waged at the Rhea County Court House in Dayton, Tennessee (Menton 1997, p. 35).

According to the introduction to the play, however, the Scopes Trial was “clearly the genesis of this play,” and the action of the play occurred in a town called Hillsboro (likely a play on the word *hillbilly*), which the play placed in “the buckle on the Bible belt” (play script p. 13). The play consistently showed the people of “Hillsboro” as narrow-minded, ignorant, rude and worse.

An example is the claim that the mayor offered to look for some way to keep Darrow from even entering the town (play script p. 24). When Darrow finally arrived in Hillsboro, a young girl screamed that Darrow was “the Devil,” then ran off in fear as if this was the typical reaction of the town's population to evolutionists (play script p. 32). These events are all totally fiction.

Labeling the play fiction does not negate the fact that it openly mocked the religious beliefs of millions of Americans. Examples include statements such as Hillsboro has “a few ignorant bushes. No tree of knowledge” (play script p. 29). It includes such songs as “Give Me That Old-Time Religion, It’s Good Enough For Me ... It’s Good Enough For [Bryan, who then stated] I’ve come [to Dayton, TN] because what happened in a school room of your town has unloosed a *wicked attack* from the big *cities of the North!*” (emphasis mine, play script pp. 16–18). In his critique of the play Professor Menton wrote that the play’s supporters claim that historical accuracy was sacrificed to “liven up” the plot, such as by introducing a

fictional love story in “Hollywood history.” The evidence suggests, however, that the inaccuracies encountered in the play *Inherit The Wind* are substantive, intentional and systematic. It is actually quite easy to see a pattern in the inaccuracies, and from this one can make a reasonable guess as to the motive. Christians, and particularly William Jennings Bryan, are consistently lampooned throughout the play, while skeptics and agnostics are consistently portrayed as intelligent, kindly and even heroic .... the writers of the screen play *Inherit The Wind* never intended to write a historically accurate account of the Scopes trial, nor did they seriously attempt to portray the principal characters and their beliefs in an unbiased and accurate way (Menton 1992, p. 4).

Instead of condemning intolerance against Christians, the play openly condones bigotry. One example is when selecting a jury, Mr. Dunlop was summarily dismissed after he stated he believed “in the Holy Word of God” (play script pp. 36–37). Another common example is Drummond’s (Darrow) words: “All I want is to prevent the clock-stoppers from dumping a load of medieval nonsense into the United States Constitution.” Stating that people who believe the Bible is God’s Word should be banned from juries because they are “clock-stoppers” who believe in “medieval nonsense” does not encourage tolerance.

The “medieval nonsense” in this case was the teaching that God created humans, in contrast to the view that humans descended from ape-like ancestors by the process of natural selection eliminating the less fit and inferior races through disease, wars and losing out for the competition for food. One of the most bigoted sections in the play is Reverend Jeremiah Brown’s dialogue (play script p. 19). This “spiritual leader of the community” is portrayed as a sadistic, hateful man who lambasted his own daughter for not condemning those that he disapproved of:

Rev. Brown: Do we cast out this sinner in our midst?

All: Yes! (Each crash of sound from the crowd seems to strike Rachel physically, and shake her)

Rev. Brown: Do we call down hellfire on the man who

has sinned against the Word?

All: (Roaring) Yes!

Rev. Brown: (Deliberately shattering the rhythm, to get into a frenzied prayer, hands clasped together and lifted heavenward) ... Strike down this sinner. Let him feel the terror of Thy sword! For all eternity, let his soul writhe in anguish and damnation.

Rachel: No! (She rushed to the platform) No, Father. Don’t pray to destroy Bert! [Scopes]

Rev. Brown: Lord, we call down the same curse on those who ask grace for this sinner—though they be of my blood, and flesh of my flesh! (play script pp. 58–60).

Rachel, who has no counterpart in the actual trial, according to Pavlos “believes academic freedom [freedom of thought] is in opposition to her fundamentalist beliefs” (Pavlos 2000, p. 50). In the play she eventually rejected theism due to the narrow-mindedness of her father. This section of the play soon became a storybook romance when she informed Bert (Scopes)

that she has decided to start thinking for herself, which in the context of the play seems to mean that she will accept Bert’s way of thinking instead of her father’s. (I can’t help wondering whether her new independence of mind will have unexpected consequences, and whether Bert will ever have any second thoughts about having encouraged it.) The two lovers decide to leave town and get married. Love and reason [the play implies] thus overcome prejudice and bigotry (Johnson 1997, p. 28).

As Johnson concluded, the play implies that “Christianity has no program other than to teach hatred. At the surface level the play is a smear, although it smears an acceptable target and hence is considered suitable for use in public schools” (Johnson 1997, p. 30). This totally fictional account of the minister’s intolerance, even as play notes, is the opposite of the general situation in Dayton. Darrow himself stated that

I don’t know as I was ever in a community in my life where my religious ideas differed as widely from the great mass as I have found them since I have been in Tennessee. Yet I came here a perfect stranger and I can say what I have said before that I have not found upon anybody’s part—any citizen here in this town or outside the slightest discourtesy. I have been treated better, kindlier and more hospitably than I fancied would have been the case in the north.... (Trial Transcript pp. 225–226).

### Evolution Racist

The evolution of the 1920s that Bryan opposed was blatantly racist and sexist. The play claims (play script p. 7) that Scopes was arrested and jailed because of teaching the material in *Hunter’s Civic Biology*

that Darrow claimed was “enlightened science.” Hunter’s *A Civic Biology* taught that “Negroes” were evolutionarily inferior to whites and openly advocated eugenic policies.

This text specifically teaches racism, noting that there are now “on earth five races . . . of man, each very different from the other. The first is the Ethiopian or Negro type, originating in Africa . . . and finally, the highest type of all, the Caucasians.” The text also teaches the infamous Darwinian eugenics theory. After the problem of inferior humans is discussed, the writer concludes that

if such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading. Humanity will not allow this, but we do have the remedy of separating the sexes in asylums or other places and in various ways of preventing intermarriage and the possibilities of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race. Remedies of this sort have been tried successfully in Europe and are now meeting with success in this country (Hunter 1914, pp. 263–265).

One of the “remedies” to this problem that Hunter proposed was later used in the United States as part of the rationale to justify sterilizing certain people and limiting the immigration of certain ethnic groups such as Jews. This is one central aspect of evolution that Bryan opposed (Bergman 1992; Gould 1981, 1991). It was also this teaching that Darrow defended and Bryan actively condemned (Kazin 2006). The conclusion that Bryan defended was, in the words of the famous anthropologist Ruth Benedict, “the Bible story of Adam and Eve, father and mother of the whole human race, told centuries ago,” which, she concludes “related the same truth that science has shown today; that all peoples of the earth are a single family and have a common origin” (Benedict 1943, p. 171).

### The Core of the Struggle

Essentially, Bryan was fighting for the right of the parents to influence instruction in the public schools, at least in the area of religion; whereas, as a socialist, Darrow was more in favor of state control of public schools, a struggle that continues to this day. Bryan wrote that courts have ruled that the government can direct what shall be taught and also forbid the teaching of anything “manifestly inimical to the public welfare.” The above [court] decision goes even farther and declares that the parent not only has the right to guard the religious welfare of the child, but is . . . duty bound to guard it. That decision fits this case exactly. The state had a right to pass this law, and the law represents the determination of the parents to guard the religious welfare of their children (Trial Transcript 1925, p. 322).

According to Bryan’s undelivered closing statement, he believed that schools should be neutral on the issue of religion. He wrote that the law *Scopes* challenged

did not have its origin in bigotry. It is not trying to force any form of religion on anybody. The majority is not trying to establish a religion or to teach it—it is trying to protect itself from the effort of an insolent minority to force irreligion upon the children under the guise of teaching science. What right has a little irresponsible oligarchy of self-styled “intellectuals” to demand control of the schools of the United States, in which 25,000,000 . . . children are being educated at an annual expense of nearly \$2,000,000,000? (Trial Transcript 1925, p. 322).

This is why Bryan suggested atheists and evolutionists set up their own schools if they wanted to teach human evolution. Although Bryan supported an increase in the regulatory power of the federal government in certain areas, he felt that if a subject that directly relates to religion, such as evolution, was taught in public school the parents must have the central say in what was taught.

### The Play Condemns Bryan

Throughout the play, Bryan is made to appear as an intolerant, ill-informed, pompous fool, a liar and a moron, mouthing such gems as he did not want “zoological hogwash slobbered around the schoolrooms” (play script p. 73). Pavlos (2000, p. 44) notes that in fact Bryan was not a “narrow-minded, pompous, hypocrite,” but rather was a “cooperative, kind, and charming man.”

An example of the play picturing him as deliberately ignorant is, when asked if he had read Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, Bryan said he had not and “never will” (play script p. 77). In fact, his biographer noted that he did read Darwin’s *Origin* in 1905 (Levine 1965). Bryan was also a member of the *American Association for the Advancement of Science* and, in his closing comments, which he was not able to make during the trial itself, stated that mankind is “indebted to science for benefits conferred by the discovery of the laws of nature” and the many positive contributions of science to humanity documented “that science . . . should be cherished” (Trial Transcript 1925, pp. 322–323; see also Perloff 1999, pp. 202–203).

Furthermore, Bryan was portrayed in the play in an increasingly unfavorable light as the story developed. Larson (1997, p. 264) even noted that one of the later actors representing Bryan was now “fatter and more disreputable than before”. One reviewer of the play described Bryan in the following very unflattering terms as

the famous orator and lawyer who will not listen to anyone’s views but his own. He portrays a charismatic

leader whom the people of Hillsboro worship and follow blindly. He refers to the subject of the trial as *evil-lution* and refuses to hear any evidence that might indicate that the Bible should not be taken literally (Flint 1994).

In the play Bryan took the witness stand to “defend his fundamentalist position.” In the actual trial he “agreed to take the witness stand” because he “wanted to interrogate the defense,” specifically Darrow (Pavlos 2000, p.12). Unfortunately, he never was given that opportunity because Darrow instructed the judge to find the defendant guilty. Consequently, the trial effectively ended without Bryan being able to put Darrow on the stand, something that he very much wanted to do. This is also why Bryan was never able to give his closing arguments that he worked so hard to prepare. In the play he was a fundamentalist; in real life, although a religious conservative, he was a political liberal (Kazin 2006). In one review of the play, Flint (1994) wrote that one actor had

an interesting role as a barefoot wild-haired prophet or village idiot. Later on in the play ... [this same actor] appears again as a famous scientist who never gets a chance to testify because of the narrow-mindedness of the judge, who reflects the narrow-mindedness of the town.

No one could read the play and conclude anything but that it was trying to paint Bryan as an ignorant fool. In reality “for a layman, Bryan’s knowledge of the scientific evidence both for and against evolution was unusually sophisticated” (Menton 1992, p.2). Admittedly, in the play Darrow lambasted H.L. Mencken for his caustic and cruel remarks about Bryan, stating, “You have no more right to spit on his [Bryan’s] religion than you have a right to spit on my religion! Or my lack of it!” (play script, p.112). This statement is ironic in view of the venom that Darrow threw at Bryan during most of the play. Darrow then concluded that Bryan has “the right to be wrong!” (play script, p.114). Linder (1975, p.9) noted that the best

example of non-objective reporting was that done by H.L. Mencken, who covered the trial for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. Mencken, sharp-tongued critic of Americana and iconoclast par excellence, and a number of other reporters acted unofficially on behalf of the defense. Mencken’s attitude to Bryan is summed up by his reaction to the news of Bryan’s death a few days after the trial: “We killed the son-of-a-[expletive deleted]!”

The movie starring Spencer Tracy was even more biased than Mencken’s reporting. As Galli (1997) concludes, the movie is a worse distortion of the facts than even the play, in which liberals are “untarnished heroes and fundamentalists, buffoons”.

### Darrow Pictured as an Enlightened Humanitarian

Conversely, Darrow was pictured in the play as an enlightened humanitarian who had the best interest of the people in mind. In fact, Darrow was a materialist and a determinist who defended some of his clients, such as Loeb and Leopold, by inferring that they did not possess free will. Darrow did not want to balance the Bible with evolutionary science; he wanted to eliminate theism from society and replace it with an agnostic philosophy and his idea of science (Johnson 1997, p.29). Those who support enlightenment views, which, according to Alters involved

an individual’s right to think and seek truth, instead of being forced to accept the doctrine advocated by the town and Brady (i.e., creationism). At one point he assures the court, that unlike what Brady contends, he is ... “just trying to stop the bigots and ignoramuses from controlling education in this country.” In a very dramatic and entertaining way, this presentation of “Inherit the Wind” clearly delineates the struggle between those who wish to legislate anti-evolutionism and those who strive to keep science free from religious absolutism (Alters 1995, pp.33–34).

As we have seen, this hardly is an accurate summary of the play’s purpose. It is noteworthy that in order to please the film censors at the Hays office, the 1960 film makes a distinction between “extreme fundamentalism” versus “the true Christian faith” (Gardner 1987). The play is far more mean-spirited. Gardner (1987, p.194) explained that the outcome of the compromise in the *Inherit the Wind* case was a clear

example of the scope and limits of censorship. Though the changes they exacted damaged the film, they did not cripple it. *Inherit the Wind*, in the manner of all Stanley Kramer’s films, was a movie of strong ideas and opinions. Despite the censors’ adjustments, the ideas were presented with a boldness that reflected the censors’ declining powers in the year 1959.

The Hays Office indicated that “censorship” of the play was required because

*Inherit the Wind* presented religious people in a very unfavorable light. The playwrights ... were portraying Christians as fanatical in their beliefs (Gardner 1987, p.194).

Frank McCarthy sent a copy of the play on March 21, 1955 to Geoffrey Shurlock at the Hays Office. The office responded as follows:

We regret to inform you that this basic story is unacceptable ... A story such as this violates that portion of the code which states that “no film ... may throw ridicule on any religious faith.” The material contains an attack on Christian doctrines and in general presents religious-thinking people in an extremely unfavorable light. Moreover, this

material contains serious misrepresentations of facts regarding the basic principles of Christianity. We regret the necessity of this unfavorable judgment. However, you will realize that the proper dispensation of our responsibilities [gives us] no alternative (Gardner 1987, p. 194).

The play contained these code “violations,” that would need to be corrected if their office was to give its approval to the film. Specifically, the play contained what the reviewers regarded was

an unfair portrayal of religious-thinking people, i.e., those of the Christian faith. Nearly all of the Christians portrayed in this story seem to be described as near-fanatic, Old Testament fundamentalists. In addition, there is a tendency to create a considerable amount of sympathy against the Christian Bible and to misrepresent certain facts regarding Christian dogma. This all adds up to the ridicule of a religious faith, thus rendering this story unacceptable ...

The compromise was dealt with by agreeing that the “problem could be overcome by differentiating between the extreme fundamentalism presented in this play and the true Christian faith” (Gardner 1987, p. 195). Ironically, John Scopes, who knew full well that the play was grossly inaccurate, “agreed to help promote *Inherit the Wind*” (Phillips 2001, p. 2172).

### The Actual Purpose of the Play

It is blatantly obvious that the intention of the play is to mock Christians who take their religion seriously and to openly promulgate a secular, naturalistic, nontheistic worldview. According to Iannone (1997, pp. 29–32) the play is an “ideologically motivated hoax” to ridicule Bryan and his followers and in fact is “bigotry in reverse.” The general opposition by the informed Christian community to the play illustrates that those who are aware of its goal have concluded that it does not “cleanse ... bigotry and narrow-mindedness,” as some allege, but is the epitome of such.

In fact *Inherit the Wind* is not humorous as claimed by its supporters, nor is it meant to help us laugh at ourselves. Rather, it is openly contemptuous of a certain group of people. Laughing at innocent minorities is not funny, but malicious. The play manifests an intolerance that has no place in a free society that respects human rights. In some ways the film is more malicious and mocking than the most successful anti-Semitic film ever produced, the infamous Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* (Tegel 2000). Linder (1975, p. 9) concluded that the

negative impression of Bryan conveyed by the American press in July, 1925, was enhanced decades later by a Broadway play (1950) made into a movie (1960) entitled *Inherit the Wind*. The movie more than the play assailed Bryan and fundamentalism and

badly hurt their image ... The movie is a classic case of historical distortion and the manipulation of ideas and characters. Bryan is portrayed as an ignorant fanatic, the fundamentalists are caricatured as vicious and narrow-minded hypocrites, and Darrow is the idealized showcase liberal. And this is the stuff of which stereotypes are made.

Furthermore, Menton (1997, p. 38) concluded that the play and movie

are not simply inaccurate, but rather are highly biased ... The historical inaccuracies are systematic and of a kind that presents a consistent bias of slanderous proportions against people who believe the Bible’s miracles, and especially the biblical account of creation .

Calling the play a work of fiction, as is common, does not excuse its enormous distortions of the facts. An entire website that has documented its distortions required 25 pages ([www.themonkeytrial.com](http://www.themonkeytrial.com)). The introduction by Lawrence and Lee to the published play (1955) specifically credits the Scopes Trial as the source of the play. On this point Alters (1995, p. 33) wrote that the “portrayals of the historical characters and locations are so thinly veiled that even those with the most minimal of historical backgrounds concerning the Scopes Trial could make the connection” .

Those who experience the play are given the clear impression that the events portrayed were historical—which they often conclude are valid. In the words of Menton (1992, p. 4), the play “has unfortunately become widely perceived as an essentially historical account of the trial”. Menton (1992, p. 4) concluded that this is unfortunate because the effect the “frequent showings of the various versions of *Inherit The Wind* are likely to have on the attitudes and beliefs of its viewers” is to bias the public against a worldview held by most religious people in America . A doctoral thesis about the effect of the play on viewers found that it was a very effective means to teach Darwinism

in science classes. A student production of the play *Inherit the Wind* ... was presented to the biology students attending two senior high schools in the suburbs of a major east coast city as part of their study of evolution. For ... this research, 50% of these students attended the performance of *Inherit the Wind*, while the remaining 50% of the students attended regular classes instead of the play. [Then] ... Thurstone’s Attitude toward Evolution survey was administered to both experimental and control groups. To assess changes in attitude over time, this survey was again administered to the students six weeks after the presentation of the play ... It was shown through an analysis of variance that the experimental group of students who attended the performance of *Inherit the Wind* had a significantly more positive attitude toward evolution than did

the control group of students who did not attend the performance (McDonald 1986, pp. 1–2).

A major concern is that the play did “not alter the facts merely to stimulate the audience,” but rather grossly perverted events of the Scopes Trial to advance a specific social agenda (Perloff 1999, p. 198). Johnson concluded that a major result of the play was to instigate intolerance against those who speak up against the “dogmatic teaching of Darwinian evolution.” In Johnson’s words:

Why is it so hard for reasoned criticism of biased teaching to get a hearing? The answer to that question begins with a ... play called *Inherit the Wind* ... [which] is a masterpiece of propaganda, promoting a stereotype of the public debate about creation and evolution that gives all virtue and intelligence to the Darwinists. The play did not create the stereotype, but it presented it in the form of a powerful story that sticks in the minds of journalists, scientists and intellectuals generally. If you speak out about the teaching of evolution at public hearing, audience and reporters will be placing your words in the context of *Inherit the Wind*. Whether you know it or not, you are playing a role in a play. The question is, which role in the story will be yours? (Johnson 1997, pp. 24–25).

Furthermore, the play has proved to be “remarkably durable” and has had a much greater impact on American culture than the actual trial (Larson 1997, pp. 243–444). This is tragic because the play has done much to distort history and, as a result, many

teachers have misconceptions about the history and legal aspects of the evolution/creationism controversy. For example, most people (and virtually all biologists) think they know what happened at the infamous (and enormously influential) Scopes “Monkey Trial,” but they usually don’t ... [because their] ... views of that trial ... have been influenced far more by inaccurate media reports and the admittedly fictitious *Inherit the Wind* than by what actually happened. Similarly, many teachers believe that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that creationism is not science. It has not (Moore 1998 p. 487).

## Summary

If one of the goals of the play was to distort history, the authors succeeded marvelously. As Perloff (1999, p. 197) concludes, public beliefs about the Scopes Trial are today “based largely on *Inherit the Wind*.” The massive mis-education as a result of the play has done much harm, and little effort now exists to attempt to teach the facts of history in this area in either our schools or the mass media. It is ironic that Lawrence and Lee’s goal for the play was to teach the importance of the “freedom to think and the freedom to experience life,” yet ended up writing a play that had the exact opposite effect (Pavlos 2000, p. 4). They

may have believed that freedom of thought would be encouraged by the play because in the play Darrow stressed several times the importance of having an open-mind (Pavlos 2000, p. 4). Of course, in academia at least, this is not the situation today (Johnson 2001).

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