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Biology Textbooks and the Decentering of the Scopes Trial

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Review by William Vance Trollinger Jr., Department of History and Department of Religious Studies, University of Dayton

- Adam R. Shapiro. *Trying Biology: The Scopes Trial, Textbooks, and the Antievolution Movement in American Schools*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

I taught for 8 years at a moderate evangelical liberal arts college. At one faculty meeting the topic turned to the challenge of dealing with controversial topics in the classroom, a pressing question given that many of our students came from extremely conservative backgrounds. One faculty member commented that he and his colleagues in the sciences avoided problems by never using the word “evolution” in the classroom. A number of us from the humanities immediately expressed shock and dismay. In response, our colleague reassured us that science faculty were indeed teaching evolution, but they had learned they could be spared student resistance and parental phone calls by replacing the word “evolution” with “development.”

I was reminded of this while reading Adam Shapiro’s fine book, *Trying Biology: The Scopes Trial, Textbooks, and the Antievolution Movement in American Schools*. Central to *Trying Biology* is the argument that the Scopes Trial was not the inevitable result of an eternal conflict between science and religion, but instead grew out of “debates over American education that had little to do with either science or religion” (12). As Shapiro nicely articulates, the school antievolution movement that emerged in the early 1920s was a backlash against schools teaching evolution “in a politically charged way” and “to a new population of students” (65).

Three developments fueled this backlash. First, there was “a new generation of biology textbooks that...intertwined applications of biology promoting certain cultural and economic worldviews”—an approach known as “civic biology”—and that had as their target audience students in the urban North. The second was a move (particularly in the South and West) “away from local textbook adoption in favor of state-level regulation,” a shift driven by intense frustration with monopolistic publishing firms and corrupt textbook salesmen. Finally, there was the “expansion of compulsory high school into the rural South...which brought civic biology textbooks to students for whom other approaches to the life sciences were intended” (66).

These developments fatefully (but not inevitably) coalesced in Tennessee in 1925. Seeking support for his reform bill expanding compulsory public education throughout the state, Governor Peay “consented to what he thought would be a symbolic protest against state control of school content” (83), i.e., the Butler Act, which outlawed the teaching of evolution. That it proved not to be symbolic was due in good part to the biology textbook that had been adopted throughout most of Tennessee, i.e., George Hunter’s *Civic Biology*. Not only was Hunter’s book designed for the urban North, it had been first published in 1914, and by the mid-1920s was badly in need of revision. As Shapiro details, Hunter started making revisions in April 1925, a few weeks before John Scopes was indicted. While the national media spotlight shone brightly on the impending “monkey trial,” Hunter—who “seems to have thought

that the whole flap over the teaching of evolution was a misunderstanding”—added but one sentence that addressed the burgeoning controversy: “It must not be considered that man evolved from a monkey” (120). Two weeks before the Scopes Trial began Hunter submitted his revised manuscript and then headed off for vacation in Montana. While the “trial of the century” unfolded, and while *Civic Biology* secured its reputation as the textbook that not only “attacked Christianity” but “even indirectly led to [William Jennings] Bryan’s death” (121), the now notorious author was relaxing somewhere in Glacier Park, blissfully unaware.

When Hunter finally returned to civilization he discovered that his editors— prodded by textbook salesmen who understood how the trial had tarnished perceptions of *Civic Biology*—were determined to make dramatic revisions. Hunter adamantly opposed these changes, but his editors had the final say, conclusively demonstrating Shapiro’s point that one cannot “attribute all the content of a published text to its author” (131).

But while Hunter “could not bear to look at” at the final version of his revised textbook (131), Shapiro points out that “it is hard to see how its content was all that different from its precursor’s” (132). In fact, the primary change wrought by the editors was to replace the word “evolution” with “heredity and development” (thus establishing the precedent used by the faculty at the evangelical college where I taught). Other textbooks took the same approach, some doing so even prior to the Scopes Trial. When publishers did not want to create a new edition they simply engaged in cutting and pasting, which occasionally required noncontroversial filler that—in the case of one textbook—could leave the “impression that Darwin’s principal importance to history of biology was his groundbreaking [work] on earthworms” (145). Sometimes the editorial work was sloppy: In the 1927 revision of William Atwood’s *Biology* all references to evolution were removed from the main text, but the glossary still retained “evolution.”

Adam Shapiro is wonderfully insightful on school antievolutionism and the history of biology textbooks. The author is less sure-footed in his discussion of fundamentalism, particularly fundamentalist understandings of the Bible. According to Shapiro,

For [Bryan]—as for most Fundamentalist Protestants in the early 1920s— “literalism” referred to the authorship of the Bible, to the fact that every word of the Bible was as God inspired. To the letter, the Bible was right and true. But this belief did not endorse the literal interpretation of the scriptures. Many literalists, including Bryan, held that the human act of interpretation could not provide the same kind of certainty as that revealed by God. (103)

Shapiro overstates his case, perhaps regarding Bryan, certainly regarding most (all?) other fundamentalists of the 1920s, who were quite confident that they could *know* what the Bible means, at least on most matters. The doctrine of inerrancy— developed in its most sophisticated form in the late nineteenth century by Princeton theologians—went beyond the conviction that the Bible was “right and true” to include within it the notion that the Bible was “factually” or “literally” true in what it had to say

on all topics, including history, science, and even the future (Harris 1998; Marsden 1980; Sandeen 1970; Weber 1982). The latter was the particular domain of dispensational premillennialism, which held that— if read “literally”— the so-called prophetic books of the Bible clearly reveal what is coming at the end of history (Boyer 1992). Dispensational premillennialism spread like wildfire throughout conservative Protestantism thanks in good part to the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909, 1917), the Bible of choice of American fundamentalists. Scofield did not present his extensive notes as interpretation at all, but, instead, as the commonsensical, literal reading of the Bible.

Fundamentalists have always based their claims on a “literal” interpretation of the Bible. So in his reference notes C. I. Scofield claimed that a careful reading of Genesis 1:1–2 revealed there was a gap in time between the first and second days of creation. Other fundamentalists, including Bryan, claimed that an exegesis of the Genesis 1 “day” revealed that this could be read as an “age.” Both views claimed to be a “literal” reading of the Bible, both views allowed for an old earth, and both views were very much in the fundamentalist mainstream. But given the nature of texts, especially texts as strange and complex as the Bible, there is no one “literal” interpretation; what counts as “literal” in one historical moment is different from what counts as “literal” in another historical moment (Trollinger and Trollinger forthcoming). After the publication of *The Genesis Flood* (Whitcomb and Morris 1961) fundamentalists rapidly came to understand young-earth creationism as *the* literal interpretation of the Bible, with young-earth creationists enjoying the rhetorical high ground by claiming that they were “more literal” in their reading of Genesis than were their old-earth creationist forebears (Harding 2000).

It is a mistake to draw too bright a line between the old-earth creationist fundamentalism of the 1920s and contemporary young-earth creationist fundamentalism. The similarities go beyond privileging a literal interpretation of the Bible. It is certainly true, as Shapiro emphasizes, that Bryan adamantly rejected the notion that science and religion are inherently conflicting. But it is also true that Ken Ham, impresario of the Creation Museum in Kentucky, repeatedly makes the same point. Moreover, while there is no question that Ham and his fellow young-earth creationists portray the battle against “evolution and millions of years” as part of a culture war binary (Trollinger and Trollinger forthcoming), William Jennings Bryan and his fellow old-earth creationists helped create this binary with their eager participation in the Scopes Trial spectacle, their determination to link evolution to cultural depravity in general and World War I in particular, and, as noted by Shapiro, their adamant refusal to accept the possibility that theistic evolution was a legitimate Christian position.

Shapiro rightly argues that the Scopes Trial was not inevitable, and in some sense was a historical accident. This is excellent work that undercuts the notion that religion and science are in necessary, eternal conflict. That said, old-earth creationists and young-earth creationists alike have worked very hard to incorporate the fight against evolution into a culture war narrative, worked so hard that it is only through the careful labors of scholars like Adam Shapiro that we can even consider the possibility that it could have been and could be otherwise.

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