

Reasons for Anti-Evolutionism Succeeding in the South

R. HALLIBURTON, JR., Northeastern State College

The United States experienced a pungent and vitriolic anti-evolution movement during the 1920's. During that decade no less than 37 anti-evolution bills, resolutions or riders were introduced in states stretching from coast to coast. However, the movement was most successful in the South. Each and every Southern state experienced a cogent and bitter controversy. Oklahoma, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas passed prohibitory state laws. The legislatures of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas rejected anti-evolution bills during the decade—some state rejected the prohibitive measures twice. The states that did not pass state-wide anti-evolution legislation fashioned other procedures to prevent the teaching of evolution as a theory or fact.

Governor Cameron Morrison of North Carolina directed the State Board of Education to remove all books which "in any way intimate an origin of the human race other than that contained in the Bible" from the approved textbook list. The board subsequently voted to prohibit the *teaching* of the theory of evolution in the public schools. The Texas State Textbook Commission, after the defeat of an anti-evolution bill in the legislature, ordered all references to evolution deleted from all adopted texts. The Louisiana State Superintendent of Public Instruction ordered the same emasculating operation for his state's adopted texts. Individual cities and school districts often accomplished the same goal in the remainder of the Southern states. Moreover, public school teachers frequently became their own censors in order not to jeopardize their positions.

Multiple causes contributed to this success within the Bible belt. These causes were principally cultural, political and religious in nature. Among the cultural factors, the South was the most illiterate region of the nation. Industrially, by most criteria, it was the most backward region of the nation. The South lacked institutions of higher learning of the first rank. Academic freedom did not exist to the extent it did in other regions. Although a few Southern administrators spoke out, most refused to do so. Among those who did oppose the anti-evolutionists, however, were President Thomas D. Boyd of Louisiana State University, Chancellor Alfred Hume of the University of Mississippi and President William Louis Poteat of Wake Forest.

Professors usually remained discreetly silent, but those who spoke against the anti-evolutionists were often dismissed. Among numerous professors who were discharged or forced to resign were A. L. Pickens, professor of biology and head of the department at Furman University, Ralph G. Demaree, professor of physics at Kentucky Wesleyan, Henry Fox, professor of biology at Mercer University, Grove S. Dow, professor of sociology at Baylor University, and John A. Rice, professor of Old Testament at Southern Methodist University. Others included Jesse W. Sprowls, professor of law and Robert S. Radford, professor of Latin, both of the University of Tennessee. Sinclair B. Conley, head of the department of psychology and education, J. Vernon Harvey, head of the department of botany, and Newell W. Sawyer, head of the department of English, all of Oklahoma Baptist University, suffered the same fate. Not one of Oklahoma's outstanding educators spoke out against the anti-evolutionists. They usually refused to make any comment whatsoever. When inquiries were directed at them specifically, Doctor Herbert Patterson, Dean of the Oklahoma A. & M. College Summer School, made only an ambiguous statement. M. A. Nash, State Superintendent of Public Instruction and a member of the Oklahoma Baptist University Board of

Trustees, asked to be excused from making any comment. John G. Mitchell, President of Central State Teachers' College, and Doctor Eugene Antrim, president of Oklahoma City University, refused to be quoted. J. R. Barton, superintendent of the Oklahoma City schools, chose to remain silent also. The *Oklahoma Teacher*, the official organ of the Oklahoma Education Association, failed to produce a single reference concerning the evolution issue. The ominous silence of Southern educators contributed to the courage, morale, dedication and success of the anti-evolution forces. Moreover, it allowed the fundamentalists to concentrate their wrath toward the very few who did not remain silent. The controversy directly caused the "death" of at least one college—Kings College of Checotah, Oklahoma—and directly gave "birth" to at least one institution—William Jennings Bryan University of Dayton, Tennessee.

Community leaders, especially the press, often abdicated their positions of responsibility. The press frequently led the local anti-evolution movements by printing bellicose anti-intellectual editorials which ridiculed and condemned evolution, science, higher education in general, and college professors in particular. The following is a representative example. The *Western Recorder* of Louisville wrote, "If evolution is truth", 'then, . . . truth is responsible for all the crime, ugliness, the rapine, which the world has.'"¹ The *Jackson News* of Breathitt, Kentucky, editorialized, "The professors at the state university may believe they are descended from apes and baboons, but let it be known that the good people of Breathitt are pure Anglo-Saxon."² The *Jackson, Mississippi, Clarion-Ledger* pleaded with Mississippi's Governor Henry W. Whitefield and urged him not to heed Chancellor Hume's request to veto a proposed anti-evolution bill. The editor remarked:

It is true, Governor, that it sounds big and smart and superior to favor the teaching of evolution in the schools of the State, and it is very likely that many of the boys and girls would take to the study of this theory like a duck takes to water. It is also true that it is a rather easy matter to teach boys to drink moonshine whisky, even when they don't like the stuff, and girls to smoke cigarets [sic], for they, too, often feel that this is giving expression to their 'independence', and that familiarity with these things marks them as being 'big' and 'smart' and 'superior.'

But does it, Governor?

Don't disappoint the people of Mississippi, Governor. Don't do something that may shake the faith of young people in the first book of the Bible.'

The ecclesiastical press was even more adamant in articulating its opposition to the "leviathan" evolution. Thousands of tracts, pamphlets, resolutions, and "minutes" were printed and distributed by denominational presses.

Racism was a factor in the controversy because evolution disputed the traditional dictum that God purposefully created the Negro to be and remain forever an inferior being. Many "Independent" Southern fundamentalists thought this flaunted natural law and God's will. Even the Ku Klux Klan lent its support to the cause of anti-evolutionism as a "Christian" duty. Moreover, the South—more than other regions—had a rigidly fixed system of mores, traditions and institutions which directed thought toward the past rather than the future. Included among the numerous factors which contributed to this Southern mentality were paternalism, a latent inferiority complex, xenophobia, aristocracy, resistance to change, inadequate education—both quantitatively and qualitatively—individual and collective guilt, racist white-supremacy, false pride and conformity.

Politically, Southern demagogues seized anti-evolutionism as a means to insure and enhance their careers. Such political figures as Governor Cameron Morrison of North Carolina, Representative William D. Upshaw of Georgia and Governor Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson of Texas are representative of those who capitalized on the controversial issue by taking up the cudgels of literalism and anti-evolution. Since political conformity had long been considered a virtue in the one-party solid South, candidates believed that anti-evolution pronouncements would gain additional votes without the risk of alienating any who were already in the fold. Hence, this fortuitous issue gave them a ready-made audience and loyal political supporters.

Senator Coleman L. Blease of South Carolina apprised the United States Senate that "so-called" education was ruining the country. He said that he had "seen very few people who claimed to be educated who ever would work." Governor Cameron Morrison of North Carolina after instituting anti-evolution measures in his state remarked, ". . . I did not think the schools of our state ought to teach that men were descended from monkeys or any other animal. . . ." He further stipulated, "I don't want my daughter or anybody's daughter to have to study a book that prints pictures of a monkey and a man on the same page." He then ". . . denounced biology and geology as 'nonsense.'" Morrison further declared "it was never intended that so-called scientists should so take charge of our schools as to unsettle the minds of the youth in their belief in the immaculate conception, the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to make a monkey out of Adam." Representative William D. Upshaw of Georgia, speaking to the National Education Association in Philadelphia during June of 1926, stated, "If you teach a boy that he came from an inert protoplasm (whatever that means), or a wallowing tadpole, a grinning ape or a jumping monkey, that boy will naturally want to do groveling, muddy, monkey things;" Governor Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson of Texas explained her thoughts about evolution with the dictum, "I'm a Christian mother who believes Jesus Christ died to save humanity, and I am not going to let that kind of rot get into Texas textbooks!"¹⁰ Alabama Congressman Henry B. Stagnall stated that Herbert Hoover was an evolutionist, therefore, unfit to be president of this "'Christian Nation.'" Local politicians usually displayed even greater animosity and were more flamboyant in their denunciations. Anti-evolution was sometimes the principal plank of a candidate's platform.

Some politicians found themselves trapped into supporting anti-evolution legislation. Governor Austin Peay of Tennessee is a graphic example. Peay was a popular public servant and was filling the governor's chair for a second term. He had inaugurated a progressive building program and was in the process of improving and constructing highways, schools, hospitals and prisons. He was supporting an extended public school term and increased appropriations for the University of Tennessee. The fruition of his program depended on the support of the rural legislators. Consequently, he signed Tennessee's anti-evolution bill into law with apparent misgivings and stated that he thought it would be an inactive statute.

In the religious realm the Southern Baptists—the most numerous denomination in the South—and others of fundamentalist persuasion opposed evolution *en masse*. These communicants saw evolution as a serious threat to revealed religion and became paladins of fundamentalism. Moreover, religion played a more prominent role in the lives of Southerners than it did elsewhere throughout the nation. Southerners momentarily forgot their xenophobia and welcomed outside agitators from other sections to lecture and preach against evolution.

Fundamentalist ministers of the Gospel led the "war" against evolu-

tion. Thousands of resolutions condemning evolution were passed by national, regional and local fundamentalistic denominations. Demagogues appeared in the ministerial phalanx also. The Reverend J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth, Texas, maintained that he could not tolerate ". . . that hell-born, Bible-destroying, deity-of-Christ-denying, German rationalism known as evolution."¹³ Norris further stated his anti-intellectual prejudice with a colorful statement explaining how to be a "good" preacher. Initials after a minister's name, indicating academic degrees, were referred to in these terms: "Preachers are like dogs; the sooner their tails are bobbed, the better off they are. As soon as they are deprived of these, they get down to real gospel methods."¹⁴ The Reverend Mordecai F. Ham of Oklahoma City charged that "Red" money of the Soviet government was to blame for the teaching of evolution at the University of Oklahoma. The Reverend Ben M. Bogard of Arkansas announced that "Every legislator who voted against the [anti-evolution] bill will be black-listed, and the evolution issue will enter every race from governor to constable in subsequent elections."¹⁵

These factors, though there may be numerous others, contributed significantly to the success of anti-evolutionism in the South. This success was not equaled elsewhere. Some of these causative factors did exist elsewhere throughout the nation; but all of them could be found only in the South. When some of these factors were found to be operating in other regions of the land, they usually lacked the intensity and the zeal which was present in the South. The successful Southern anti-evolution "crusade" was another manifestation of localism versus nationalism, authoritarianism versus liberalism, and aristocracy versus democracy.

FOOTNOTES

¹Beale, Howard K. 1936. *Are American Teachers Free?* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 228.

²*Ibid.*, p. 247.

³"The Vote on the Evolution Bill in the Kentucky State Legislature," *Science n. s.*, 55 (1922):317.

⁴"Banishing Evolution in the South," *Literary Digest*, 89 (1926):30.

⁵Shipley, Maynard. 1927. *The War on Modern Science*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 116.

⁶Beale, *op. cit.*, p. 310; *New York Times*, January 24, 1924, p. 3.

⁷Knight, Edgar W. 1927. Monkey or mud in North Carolina. *Independent*, 118:310.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 515.

⁹*New York Times*, June 30, 1926, p. 13.

¹⁰Shipley. *The War on Modern Science*. p. 174.

¹¹Shipley, Maynard. 1929. The Forward March of the Anti-Evolutionists. *Current History*, 29:581.

¹²Shipley, Maynard. 1930. Growth of the Anti-Evolution Movement. *Current History*, 32:331.

¹³*Tulsa Tribune*, November 10, 1927, p. 1.

¹⁴Shipley, Maynard. 1927. A year of the Monkey War. *Independent*, 119:327.