

# THEORY OF EVOLUTION: SCIENCE EDUCATION, SCOPES MONKEY TRIAL AND THEREAFTER

**Srividhya Jayakumar**

VPM's TMC Law College, Thane

Wittily it is remarked that when Man and God met, both exclaimed, "Here is my Creator!" The Bible says that Man is the divine creation of God and the evolution theory of science says that man evolves from lower animals. The theory of evolution postulates that the various species, including man, originated from their pre existing primitive types. This theory being one of the fundamental keystones of the science of living beings was and is an unavoidable part of science education. This article traces the interesting developments after an American law prohibited and punished teaching in school that man evolved from animals because it demeans the Bible.

In science education, the theory of evolution is a well-accepted view that life on earth has evolved and changed over long periods of time; the evolution continues with a process. According to Britannica (1) the theory of evolution is one of the fundamental keystones of modern biological theory. Diversity of the living species in the world is staggering and world community has risen to protect the bio diversity of the earth through an international convention- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 1992. This convention marks our commitment to the cause of sustainable development.

Charles Darwin published in 1859 his work titled '[On the Origin of Species](#)' in which he propounded the theory of evolution by natural selection. Credit is given to Alfred Russell Wallace too for his independent work in 1858. The theory believes in evolution by natural selection which enunciates those traits that have the propensity to survive and multiply the population will be selected and preserved naturally. The theory is used to explain the life evolution in both plant and animal kingdom- the flora and fauna.

## Tennessee 'monkey law'- the Butler Act

In 1871 Charles Darwin published his book "The Descent of Man." Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his theory of evolution was controversial. The anti- evolutionists and fundamentalists in Tennessee secured the Butler Act (2) to make it unlawful 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 (3) The Act declared illegal the teaching of the theory of evolution and imposed fines between \$100 to \$500. The Act was to take the side of creationism (4) in the conflict between creationism vs. evolutionism. Understandably the introduction of science in the society dominated by religion saw a challenge.

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) voiced against the law and announced that it will support the defence of anyone accused of any offence under the law. A young teacher John T Scopes was persuaded to be an accused and even some students were led to testify against him for having taught the evolution of man as per the science theory in contradiction to the biblical theory. The Scopes Monkey trial as it came to be popularly known put the Dayton town on the map. In July 1925, the famous trial was conducted wherein fervent Christian Presidential Candidate and lawyer William Jennings Bryan appeared for the Prosecution and the ACLU Clarence Darrow also an eminent lawyer appeared for the defence of Scopes. The trial became immensely famous with people pouring and crowding to witness the trial and press and radio giving wide coverage. The court had to shift the trial from the court to the open as there was not enough space to accommodate the crowd. The conviction of the teacher Scopes was preferred so that the matter can be contested at a higher court. Scopes was found guilty and was imposed a fine. Mr. Darrow passed away in a few days of the verdict of conviction. The Butler Act came to be upheld by the Tennessee Supreme Court.

The Scopes Monkey Trial is formally *the American case State of Tennessee v. John Thomas* (1925) which publicized the controversy between the Fundamentalists who wished that the scripture in Bible that God created man should take precedence over all science. Modernists propagated that evolution was not inconsistent with religion. The debate was about what should be taught in school in so serious a level that law was passed to prohibit the teaching of the theory of evolution as part of life science.

Several other American states also enacted laws similar to the Butler Act of Tennessee. The laws remained in the statute books although no teacher was ever arrested or prosecuted. In 1955 ACLU tried to fight out again, but the matter was laid to rest as it was almost a dead law.

SC Epperson v Arkansas (393 U.S. 97) (1968 November)

The constitutional vires of Monkey Act or the anti evolution law of Arkansas was brought to the court by Epperson who sought declaratory and injunctive relief questioning the constitutionality of the Act. The Arkansas law made it unlawful for the teacher to teach evolution theory justifying her removal. Yet the curriculum included the theory. A teacher Epperson challenged the Arkansas Act. The Chancery court struck down the Act; the Arkansas SC upheld it. The matter travelled to the American SC.

The court ruled that the state cannot blot out a particular theory from the curricula because of its supposed conflict with the Biblical account. The Act was held violative of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendments to the US constitution- state shall maintain neutrality in religion and state shall not curtail freedom of speech (5). First amendment- Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The Englishman Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was being taught in the States of America inspite of laws barring the teaching. The divine theory of creationism was dearer nay sacred and could not be allowed to be defied so the law was continued even though it remained a dead letter till it was again questioned by Epperson, a daring teacher. In Tennessee in 1967, a teacher Gary Scott was dismissed for violating the Monkey law and soon reinstated to avoid adverse publicity. But the teacher challenged the law; this forced the Tennessee legislature to repeal it.

It is stated that inspite of the absence of monkey laws, the standard practice in many places in America was not to teach the evolution theory. Almost 150 years after the theory Americans are still fighting the theory on the basis of religion (6) and one shall not forget that American jurisprudence gave to the world the theory of wall of separation between the church and state. The clause of the Constitution of America (7) against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and state as stated by Thomas Jefferson (8) and quoted in several US Supreme Court judgments (9).

The Hindu belief that life forms evolved from water species to reptiles and mammals and man is more than 1000 years old going by the Hindu mythology. In modern India there is no taboo on teaching science. Our Constitution makes a clarion call to all citizens to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform. It further commands for excellence in all

work (10). If any school on religious grounds fails to teach true science or teaches anything contrary to rational thinking, that failure will be in flagrant transgression of fundamental duties under the Constitution.

## REFERENCES

1. <https://www.britannica.com/science/evolution-scientific-theory>
2. Named after the Representative in the Tennessee House, John Butler who introduced the bill that was passed with overwhelming majority
3. Preamble to the Act
4. Belief that Bible story of creation is a scientific explanation for creation of the earth and life upon earth.
5. Epperson v Arkanas, [www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/393/97](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/393/97) viewed 23/03/2020
6. Overview: The Conflict Between Religion and Evolution, (updated in 2014)PEW Research Center, [www.pewforum.org/](http://www.pewforum.org/) viewed 23/03/2020
7. First Amendment to the U S Constitution
8. Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists, The Library of Congress Information Bulletin: June 1998. Lib. of Cong., June 1998. Web. Aug 7, 2010
9. Eg. Everson v Board of Education (1947) 330 U. S. 1
10. Article 51A