What role did the fundamentalists play in American society of the 1920s?

**Viewpoint:** The power and the purposes of the fundamentalist movement have been misrepresented and oversimplified by historians.

**Viewpoint:** The religious fundamentalists of the 1920s embraced modern life and in doing so won significant social gains.

**Viewpoint:** Religious fundamentalists lost influence in the 1920s because the rise of mass media spread new ideas about science and society.

It is a compelling story. The Tennessee legislature, dominated by rural rubes, passes a law prohibiting the teaching of Charles Robert Darwin’s theory of evolution, insisting instead that schoolchildren learn the story of Creation from Genesis. A courageous schoolteacher, John Scopes, committed to intellectual freedom, teaches Darwin’s theory, and the town fathers of Dayton, Tennessee, arrest him. The religious fundamentalists would allow no critical inquiry into their own vision of the world.

At the trial Scopes was defended by Clarence Darrow, the country’s greatest criminal lawyer and a crusading liberal, committed to freedom of ideas. The prosecution team was led by William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic presidential candidate, the “great commoner.” The epic arguments between the forward-looking and progressive Darrow and the backward-looking Bryan, between the scientific ideas of Darwin and the religious faith of the small-town folks of Dayton, were broadcast by radio and reported in the nation’s newspapers, and with particular glee by the cynical and acerbic journalist H. L. Mencken, who wrote off Tennessee as a hopeless wasteland, part of the “Sahara of the Bozart.” The jury convicted Scopes, so in one sense Darrow lost the case. However, in the broader sense Darrow had won by making a fool of Bryan and the bigoted Bible-thumpers of Tennessee. Two days after the trial, Bryan died of a heart attack. It was such a good story that it was turned into a hit Broadway play and a movie, *Inherit the Wind*, with Darrow, Bryan, and Mencken as the lead characters. Sophisticated New York audiences and Hollywood moviemakers saw the triumph of reason over religious doctrine as a moral victory.

However, was it this simple? Were the religious fundamentalists on the wrong side of history? Had the modern era made religion obsolete, replacing faith and belief with scientific proof? Were the fundamentalists backward-looking zealots, about to be trampled by the forces of science? The story is more complicated than a play or a movie.

Thomas E. Woods Jr. gives a compelling account of the trial itself, showing that the Tennessee fundamentalists were not cave-dwelling rejecters of science. Instead, religious fundamentalists were skeptical of claims that Darwin’s theory represented more than a theory; they evaluated it on its own terms as science, not on the terms of faith.

Tona J. Hangen explores the meaning of religious fundamentalism and demonstrates how the fundamentalists incorporated new scientific knowledge into their faith. They were ardent supporters of archaeological and geological
exploration. In addition the fundamentalists were pioneers in radio, particularly in listener-supported radio, and quickly adapted this new technology to reach the broadest possible audience. They also were more likely than mainline churches, or even the scientific establishment, to have women in leadership positions. Evangelists, such as Aimee Semple McPherson of Los Angeles’s International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, used the radio to spread their message. McPherson, a savvy entrepreneur and dynamic radio preacher, may have been the most influential woman of her era, making us question whether the fundamentalists were as backward as Inherit the Wind would make us think.

In his essay A. Bowdoin Van Riper takes a different view on the role played by radio and movies. He maintains that these new forms of entertainment actually hurt fundamentalism by changing American common culture. Audiovisual stimuli became more pervasive than the older text-based elements of common culture (for example, the Bible), making the populace more fascinated with worldly pleasures.

**Viewpoint:**

The power and the purposes of the fundamentalist movement have been misrepresented and oversimplified by historians.

The Scopes Trial of 1925 was easily one of the most important and closely followed courtroom confrontations of the twentieth century. It combined the attractions of controversy with the trappings of celebrity, pitting nationally known lawyer Clarence Darrow against William Jennings Bryan, populist politician, three-time presidential candidate, and fundamentalist Christian. But in characterizing the trial as a contest between reason and ignorance, science and superstition, historians have allowed a superficial assessment to obscure the lasting significance of the celebrated case.

The Butler Act, the center of the controversy, forbade the teaching of human evolution in Tennessee’s public schools and was in fact one of thirty-six such laws introduced in twenty states during the 1920s. Contrary to popular belief, the maximum penalty for its violation was a small fine; no one in Tennessee really imagined enforcing the law in any obnoxious way. “Probably the law will never be applied,” said Tennessee governor Austin Peay. The reason the Scopes Trial arose at all was that outsiders insisted on forcing the issue; the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) actually ran advertisements in Tennessee newspapers to locate a high-school teacher willing to challenge the law. John Thomas Scopes was pressured by a friend to accept, even though Scopes was in fact a math teacher and football coach. He had stepped in for his school’s biology teacher, who was ill, for only the last two weeks of the school year.

What exactly had the people of Tennessee rejected? They did not reject so-called micro-evolution, or evolution within a species, by which creatures and organisms possessing beneficial adaptations tended over time to replace members of their species that did not possess them. What they renounced both as unproven and contrary to the Bible was macroevolution—evolution of the species, the development of all forms of life, including man, from an original single-celled organism. This hypothesis seemed to require at least as much of a leap of faith as their own religious convictions. Indeed, Bryan complained that an “unproven hypothesis” was being foisted on their children in a subtle attempt to undermine their religious faith. (No less an authority than Karl Popper has since insisted that evolution is inherently unprovable. A scientific theory can be adequately tested only if it can be falsified, whereas evolution is per se unfalsifiable—and thus, in Popper’s words, “not a testable scientific theory.”)

Some critics said that antievolution forces judged Darwinism with a closed mind, but to them the situation seemed to be exactly the reverse: atheistic and agnostic intellectuals who already believed in philosophical naturalism seemed to flock to evolutionary theory because it taught what they wanted to believe anyway, that man is no greater than the beasts, was the subject of no special creation, and was the origin of his own law. He need not trouble himself with deriving a moral code through speculation on the natural law, since in a purposeless Darwinistic universe there is no such thing. The evolutionists’ understanding of the debilitating effects of Original Sin on the human heart were such that if you tell men that they are descended from brutes, they will need no other invitation to act as such. Thus, a great deal was at stake over this “unproven hypothesis,” whose moral repercussions seemed grave and even potentially cataclysmic. In the closing argument he never got a chance
to deliver, but was published after the close of the trial and after his death, Bryan noted: "The evolutionist does not undertake to tell us how protozoa, moved by interior and resident forces, sent life up through all the various species, and cannot prove that there was actually any such compelling power at all. And yet, the school children are asked to accept their guesses and build a philosophy of life upon them." Bryan, it should be noted, supported the teaching of evolution provided it was presented as what it was: a theory.

The conventional wisdom, of course, is that the trial pitted cool reason against a hysterical fundamentalism, and that Bryan was bested and even humiliated in the contest, his simple piety held up to ridicule by the witty and urbane sophistication of the educated Darrow. The reality is more complicated. Few historians mention, for example, that a fossil tooth presented at the trial as the remains of a human precursor, the so-called Nebraska Man, later turned out to have belonged to a pig, or that *Civic Biology* (1918), the textbook Scopes used to teach evolution, included a ranking of twenty-five races of people. As for the ignorance or otherwise of the principal antagonists, there were plenty of displays of brilliance—and gaffes—to go around. Again contrary to popular belief, Bryan had read *On the Origin of Species* (1859)—fully twenty years before the Scopes Trial—and while not a scientist by training, he possessed a good enough command of Charles Robert Darwin's theory as a layman that he was able to carry on an intelligent correspondence with Dr. Henry Fairfield Osborn, one of the leading evolutionists of his day. Darrow did manage to fluster Bryan at times during their famous confrontation, it is true, but the celebrated defense attorney displayed his own ignorance on several occasions, such as when he claimed that the Bible taught that the earth was flat; that creationism was incompatible with the Koran, the Muslim holy book; and when he made reference to the "book of... Buddha," of which there is no such thing.

There was much more at stake in the trial, of course, than the debating skills of Bryan and Darrow, or even an evolution law. The Scopes Trial was emblematic of a long-standing cultural divide in the United States, never given the sociological analysis it deserves, between the traditional beliefs and pieties of ordinary citizens and the values of much of the American intellectual class. It was already apparent to most intellectuals of the Progressive Era—particularly to Walter Lippman, Walter Weyl, and Herbert David Croly, the editors of the highly influential *New Republic* magazine—that if the country were to move in the direction they wanted, the traditional attachment to Jeffersonian democracy, with its faith in local control and the good judgment of the people, had to be replaced by a more centralized administration to be run by experts, technocrats, and people generally like themselves. This cultural divide was never more in evidence than during the celebrated Alger Hiss spy case decades later. Hiss, a State Department official accused of espionage, received an overwhelming outpouring of support from the intellectual community, who saw him as a decent and even noble liberal besieged by the forces of reaction and ignorance. Whittaker Chambers, the principal witness against Hiss, later wrote: "No feature of the Hiss Case is more obvious, or more troubling as history, than the jagged fissure, which it did not so much open as reveal, between the plain men and women of the nation, and those who affected to act, think and speak for them. It was not invariably, but in general, the 'best people' who were for Alger Hiss and who were prepared to go to almost any length to protect and defend him." Historian Eric F. Goldman, in *The Crucial Decade—and After: America, 1945–1960* (1960), concedes that Chambers's conclusion,
"however overdrawn," points to an important divide. The conflict "took on an aura of the highbrow and the heretical vs. God-fearing, none-of-your-highfalutin-nonsense, all-American common sense."

This assessment was precisely the one of many Christians of the Scopes Trial. As Bryan noted at the time, "The case has assumed the proportions of a battle-royal between unbelief that attempts to speak through so-called science and the defenders of the Christian faith, speaking through the legislators of Tennessee . . . . Your answer will be heard throughout the world; it is eagerly awaited by a praying multitude. If the [antievolution] law is nullified, there will be rejoice wherever God is repudiated, the savior scoffed at and the Bible ridiculed. Every unbeliever of every kind and degree will be happy. If, on the other hand, the law is upheld and the religion of the school children protected, millions of Christians will call you blessed."

The trial likewise represented a continuing cultural and philosophical divide between North and South. Americans had noticed this chasm as early as colonial times, but as John McCardell notes in The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830–1860 (1979), the differentiation between the two sections grew increasingly bitter as the Civil War approached. Robert Lewis Dabney, one of the most accomplished and respected of Southern Presbyterian theologians, stated the matter with characteristic candor in his A Defense of Virginia: And Through Her, of the South in Recent and Pending Contests Against the Sectional Party (1867):

We might safely submit the comparative soundness of Southern society to this test: that it has never generated any of those loathsome "isms, which Northern soil breeds, as rankly as the slime of Egypt its spawn of frogs. While the North has her Mormons, her various sects of Communists, her Free Lovers, her Spiritualists, and a multitude of corrupt visionaries whose names and crimes are not even known among us, our soil has never proved congenial to the birth or introduction of a single one of these inventions.

As historian David Hackett Fischer put it in Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (1989), "Modern ideologies in general were regarded as hostile to southern folkways."

In fact, the Scopes Trial galvanized the great intellects and literary men who spearheaded the Southern agrarian movement to organize themselves into a coherent opposition, to take a stand for Southern civilization against what they considered the encroachments of a modern world long on liberty, industry, and utilitarianism, and short on poetry, imagination, and regional diversity. The agrarians, who made their strongest and most widely noted statement in the book I'll Take My Stand: the South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930), a collection of essays and polemic by the so-called Twelve Southerners, saw in the trial a continuation of what they regarded as a kind of cultural imperialism on the part of Northern intellectuals dating from the Civil War period. The conflict they perceived was that of two distinct societies, one Gemeinschaft, the other Gesellschaft; one that valued tradition, accumulated wisdom, and historical memory, and another focused on "progress," mobility, and making things anew. As Donald Davidson, one of the original agrarians, put it in his The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States (1938): "While the North has been changing its apparatus of civilization every ten years or so . . . the South has stood its ground at a fairly safe distance and happily remained some forty or fifty years behind the times. . . . The South has never been able to understand how the North, in its astonishing quest for perfection, can junk an entire system of ideas almost overnight, and start on another one which is newer but no better than the first. This is one of the principal differences, out of many real differences, between the sections."

Davidson was no fundamentalist, and indeed seems not to have been a religious believer at all. But he perceived the importance of the stance being taken by the Southern fundamentalist. "Fundamentalism," Davidson once remarked, "in one aspect is blind and beligerent ignorance; in another, it represents a fierce clinging to poetic supernaturalism against the encroachments of cold logic; it stands for moral seriousness. The Southerner should hesitate to scorn these qualities, for, however much they may now be perverted to bigoted and unfruitful uses, they belong in the bone and sinew of his nature as they once belonged to Milton, who was both Puritan and Cavalier." What the Scopes Trial boiled down to, Davidson argued, was the question of "how far science, which is determining our philosophy of life, which is determining our physical ways of life, shall be permitted also to determine our philosophy of life." According to Peter Huff, in a 1995 Modern Age article, the South had to take its stand on this issue, even in the face of "the organized wrath of the outside world." Bryan had had the same misgivings. Evolution, an "unproven hypothesis," was giving dangerous impetus to the idea that autonomous science, which dealt exclusively with observable phenomena, could have the final word on ultimate realities, indeed could even substitute for philosophy and traditional
morality. Man needed more if he were not to revert to barbarism. Bryan argued that:

Science is a magnificent force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine. It can also build gigantic intellectual ships, but it constructs no moral rudders for the control of storm-tossed human vessel. It not only fails to supply the spiritual element needed but some of its unproven hypotheses rob the ship of its compass and thus endangers its cargo. In war, science has proven itself an evil genius; it has made war more terrible than it ever was before. Man used to be content to slaughter his fellowmen on a single plane—the earth's surface. Science has taught him to go down into the water and shoot up from below and to go up into the clouds and shoot down from above, thus making the battlefield three times as bloody as it was before; but science does not teach brotherly love. Science has made war so hellish that civilization was about to commit suicide; and now we are told that newly discovered instruments of destruction will make the cruelties of the late war seem trivial in comparison with the cruelties of wars that may come in the future. If civilization is to be saved from the wreckage threatened by intelligence not consecrated by love, it must be saved by the moral code of the meek and lowly Nazarene. His teachings, and His teachings alone, can solve the problems that vex the heart and perplex the world.

There is an irony here. In On the Origin of Species, Darwin had noted, “If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.” Biochemist Michael J. Behe did just that in Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution (1996) when he argued that the field of biochemistry, which was unknown to Darwin, undermined his theory of evolution by revealing the “irreducible complexity” of the human cell. That is, the human cell could not have been created by means of a Darwinian series of gradual accretions, since it does not function at all until all its necessary components are present. Darwin’s theory, on the other hand, requires a lengthy series of viable intermediary stages between two points on the evolutionary scale. “The result of these cumulative efforts to investigate the cell—to investigate life at the molecular level—is a loud, piercing cry of ‘design!’ The result is so unambiguous and so significant that it must be ranked as one of the greatest achievements in the history of science.”

Only time will tell how this debate will be resolved, but it would be a sweet revenge indeed for Bryan if science, the force he saw encroaching so impiously on the mysteries of the universe, should ultimately vindicate him.

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**Viewpoint:**

The religious fundamentalists of the 1920s embraced modern life and in doing so won significant social gains.

In 1922 liberal Baptist minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, then guest pastor at New York’s First Presbyterian Church, posed the provocative question “Shall the fundamentalists win?” in an influential sermon that helped set the stage for acrimonious religious battles throughout the 1920s. Historians have continued to debate Fosdick’s question, unable to reach a consensus about the impact and legacy of conservative Protestantism in that decade, as well as the rest of the twentieth century.

At first glance, fundamentalism, which was in many ways a twentieth-century attempt to return to the dominant religious doctrines and institutions of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism, does seem an unlikely contender in the contest for cultural authority in the modern world that emerged after World War I. As James Hunter has pointed out, in American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity (1983), Protestantism had been through a gradual disestablishment and loss of prestige since the late nineteenth century: it was largely displaced from both higher education and theological training; was subject to competition from increased missionization from more liberal denominations; experienced a nationwide diminution in social reform impulses; and was challenged by the arrival of over twenty-five million immigrants in the United States between 1880 and 1924, as well as the social turmoil accompanying the nation’s involvement in World War I. New historical and literary perspectives on the Bible, scientific rationalism, and the rise of the values of mass consumption that went against the grain of traditional values of thrift, discipline, and sobriety, also contributed to Protestantism entering twentieth-century America as “less than conquerors.” Two aspects of modernity in particular seemed to spell doom for traditional Protestantism: the relegation of religion to the private sphere and the popularization of the scientific theory of evolution to explain human origins. Both struck at the heart of Protestantism’s hope for social change through revival and its message of the uniqueness of humans as children created by God.

Against this backdrop a loose network of Protestant ministers and laypersons coalesced in the 1910s. They emphasized uncompromising Christian doctrines and operated through Bible...
conferences; revival circuits; the publication of an influential pamphlet series called "Fundamentals," issued between 1910 and 1915; and periodicals such as the Sunday School Times and the Baptist Watchman-Examiner. Proponents of fundamentalism urged purifying the American churches of modernist theology, separating believers from those who rejected the historic faith, and returning to the core christological doctrines as literally expressed in the Bible. Fundamentalsists generally agreed on, and sought to promote, the truth of at least these points of Christian doctrine: inerrancy of the King James version Bible, the divine birth and literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, the necessity of individual salvation through repentance, and the imminent return of Christ to the earth. Many fundamentalists believed that the world's temporal existence could be divided into eras, or dispensations. The final dispensation before the last judgement would be a millennium of peace, proceeded and ushered in by Christ's return to gather the righteous. This doctrine, known as "premillennial dispensationalism," was held by most fundamentalist leaders and followers alike.

The tenacity of these ideas, and the tenacity with which fundamentalists such as Arno Gablelein, William Bell Riley, and J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Theological Seminary and author of Christianity and Liberalism (1925), articulated them, found equally intractable opposition from groups within Protestantism who supported modernism, ecumenism, and ways to reconcile historic Christianity with modernity and scientific modes of thought. Fosdick and Shailer Mathews, author of The Faith of Modernism (1924), were key spokesmen for religious modernism. The divide between fundamentalists, who despised the moral drift of modernism, and the modernists, who rejected their opponent's exclusivity, deepened over the first half of the 1920s, erupting in a protracted debate and struggle for two denominations: the Northern Baptist and Northern Presbyterian assemblies. The eventual failure of fundamentalists to achieve a revised statement of faith in either denomination, or to rout modernists from their leadership, has often been interpreted as the last stand of a dying, outmoded, outmaneuvered religious dinosaur.

To support this view of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, historians generally point to perhaps the paradigmatic encounter between these two opposed worldviews: the 1925 trial of Dayton, Tennessee, high-school teacher John Thomas Scopes, who was accused of teaching evolution in violation of a new state law passed with fundamentalist support. Scopes was represented by the prominent criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow, and the prosecutor was the aging William Jennings Bryan. The trial, which quickly ballooned in significance beyond the antievolution crusade, attracted international media attention; thousands of reporters and curiosity-seekers descended on Dayton in July of that year. Although Scopes was found guilty, the circus atmosphere, courtroom exchanges bordering on the absurd, and derisive news reports by the likes of H. L. Mencken discredited fundamentalism in the minds of many observers. "Whether justifiable or not," wrote historian Willard B. Gatewood Jr. in Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution (1969), "the impression that fundamentalism was allied with bigotry, ignorance and intolerance was enhanced by the millions of words of newsprint and radio broadcasts emanating from Dayton."

Conventional wisdom held that after the Scopes debacle the defeated fundamentalists would quietly retreat into the past. The death of Bryan within a week of the close of the trial apparently left the antievolution wing without leadership. Writing in the liberal periodical The Christian Century after the trial, Caroline M. Hill reflected with satisfaction on fundamentalism's defeat, declaring that "the warfare between religion and science is about over." Presbyterian William Adams Brown of the Union Theological Seminary shared her sentiment and noted in 1926 that fundamentalism had not captured a "major" denomination and had been thoroughly embarrassed by the Scopes trial. Brown felt the time had come to ask, "after fundamentalism—what?"

Reports of the demise of fundamentalism, however, were greatly premature. Bryan was a popular spokesman for antievolution, but not a genuine leader in the fundamentalist movement; furthermore, his personal bias against science was atypical among religious conservatives. Most fundamentalists believed that science and reason shored up biblical truths. They attacked evolution not because it was a science, but because it was seen as bad science. Fundamentalists had an interest in precisely the same branches of research that evolutionists did, and they produced no sustained critique of science itself. The Sunday School Times, for example, made a minor celebrity of its archeological editor, Melvin Grove Kyle, who was excavating the biblical city of Kirjath-Sepher in the mid 1920s; the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb the same year as the Scopes trial was widely hailed across the religious spectrum, and fundamentalist periodicals delighted in picking apart fossil findings or presenting the latest geological evidence for the Great Flood. Contrary to popular opinion about the inherent animosity between science and religion, the Scopes Trial and the events of the
1920s only served to demonstrate fundamentalist zeal on the side of science—which they were confident would eventually prove evolution false. Antievolution crusades went on, with considerably less publicity, through decades of continued debate and successful (even, in some states, unchallenged) legislation against the teaching of evolution.

It is important to note that fundamentalists had always put far more faith in revival than legislation. Their central hope was not to legislate social change from the top down, but to awaken it through the conversion of individuals. Thus the Scopes Trial and related legislative campaigns, although a compelling concrete means to measure progress, had been a relatively minor aspect of the overall fundamentalist effort. In retrospect it can be seen that where many outside the movement perceived only failure, fundamentalists were victorious in two interrelated ways: creatively employing media to spread their ideas throughout American culture, as well as founding and nurturing a host of new institutions and organizations that soon resembled a thriving denomination. These successful strategies permitted, in turn, vigorous and long-term growth in the fundamentalist and evangelical religion in twentieth-century America.

Fundamentalist ideas, beliefs, and doctrines achieved widespread currency within the Protestant subculture, especially in Presbyterianism, Methodism, and the Baptist Conventions. Even where fundamentalists were ostensibly overruled for denominational leadership, laypersons and local pastors maintained their fundamentalist sympathies. Other denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and Pentecostals, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, though they differed significantly in many other ways, had never permitted modernist inroads into their faith.

Fundamentalism became diffusely spread throughout Protestantism; the divide at the national leadership level mirrored the often-riven congregations. Ordinary Americans of modern Middletown, as described in the 1929 sociological study of Muncie, Indiana, by Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, held fundamentalist principles paramount in their churches and community organizations; liberalism was deeply distrusted in middle America.

In fact, modernism waned noticeably by the 1930s; its confident stance toward human progress seemed at odds with the realities of the Great Depression and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Europe. Churches of the liberal mainline began a long-term decline in membership over the twentieth century, while between 1920 and 1935 the fastest growing denomination in America was the predominantly fundamentalist Southern Baptist Convention, adding 1.5 million members. The 1920s was the turnaround decade for upstart churches on the move from the margin of American Christianity toward its center.

The growth in fundamentalist churches, and organizations such as Bible institutes, conferences and summer camps, home and foreign missions, and media outlets, was not confined to any particular region of the country. The movement's fragmentation in the 1920s thus proved a survival strategy, since it entrenched fundamentalism in scattered nodes across the United States. The community around Moody Bible Institute and nearby Wheaton College in the Chicago area was one such location; the Institute established a listener-supported radio station in 1925, served as a stop on many revival circuits, and nurtured an entire generation of young evangelicals, including Paul Rader, an influential revivalist and radio preacher. Riley, an Independent Baptist and president of the World Christian Fundamental Association and the Northwestern Bible training center in Minneapolis, established an epicenter of the movement around his institutions from the 1920s to the 1940s. J. Elwin Wright, founder of the New England Fellowship, and J. Frank Norris of Texas, kept their faith in their respective parts of the country. Despite the popular characterization of fundamentalism as a marginal, backwater, rural Southern phenomenon, one discovers that between 1925 and 1945 these stereotypes were increasingly false. These fluid and vital years of building institutions from scratch also meant that women played a huge role in church ministries, revivals, and missions despite being prohibited from ordination as ministers in most fundamentalist churches and organizations.

Radio in particular demonstrated the fundamentalist knack for popularization and facility with the new national mass media. Religious groups, including Judaism, Catholicism, and the full range of Protestantism, had been active participants on radio since the medium's introduction in 1921. Although a public institution and vehicle of mass broadcasting like motion pictures, radio was typically heard not in large gatherings but by individuals or small groups in the privacy of their own homes. Radio was a particularly good medium for American religion, because both radio and religion operated in the liminal space between public and private spheres. Furthermore, radio advertised its newfangledness with appeals to an imagined American past, which resonated with the nostalgic outlook of Protestant fundamentalism. Mainline Protestant denominations soon struck deals to deliver radio programs on donated time from local stations and from the emerging radio networks; Fosdick,
for example, was a frequent speaker on the non-denominational “National Radio Pulpit.”

Fundamentalists, who were outside the institutions of national religious authority, received little public-service airtime for their messages, but thrived in the arena of listener-supported radio. By 1925 more than 10 percent of six hundred U.S. stations were owned and operated by churches and other religious organizations: this number included fundamentalist stations such as the Moody Institute’s WMBI; KFVO, owned by Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in St. Louis; and KFSG, the Los Angeles Station of Aimee Semple McPherson’s Pentecostal denomination, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Hundreds of radio ministries and programs—ranging from simple revival-style preaching or Bible study to sacred music, religious theater, or themed programs for shut-ins, children, and businessmen—could be found on the radio in the 1920s and 1930s, all paid for nearly exclusively by donations of listeners, which in itself suggests the diffuse strength of the movement and how it was becoming intertwined with mass media.

Cultural change and technological advances did not deplete fundamentalism in the 1920s. On the contrary, the distinct blend of nostalgia and forward-looking marketing of the movement helped fundamentalists successfully appropriate some of the tools and techniques of popular culture. In the short term, fundamentalism emerged transformed and revitalized despite its suffering image among the intelligentsia; in the long term, evangelical religion gathered strength. Ultimately, the victory belongs to the fundamentalists, who not only accommodated to an increasingly modern, technological, and religious nation, but creatively shaped national development throughout the century.

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Viewpoint:
Religious fundamentalists lost influence in the 1920s because the rise of mass media spread new ideas about science and society.

John Thomas Scopes became for a few days in July 1925 the most reported-on man in the United States. He owed his temporary fame to his role as defendant in the trial that soon came to bear his name: a legal test of Tennessee’s new law banning the teaching of evolution in the public schools. Scopes, a high-school teacher, had volunteered to break the law in order to make such a test possible. The trial brought leaders of the American Civil Liberties Union and the Protestant fundamentalist movement to the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee. It also attracted reporters from dozens of newspapers and, for the first time in American history, from the newly formed radio networks. The appearance of William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow for the defense accounts for some of the media interest, but not all of it. The Scopes Trial captured public attention and made good copy because of the issues involved. Many saw it as a cultural referendum—a vote of confidence on the modern age.

Conventional wisdom, sanctified by repetition in scores of textbooks, holds that Bryan and the fundamentalists blundered badly at Dayton. They won the battle—Scopes was convicted—but in doing so lost the war. Bryan’s decision to offer himself as a witness, and his subsequent poor showing on the stand, doomed fundamentalism by making it look ridiculous. Bryan’s refusal to budge from the position he had staked out—that the Bible was literally, word-for-word, true—revealed fundamentalism as impossibly tradition-bound and wholly incompatible with the modern world. The pervasive press coverage of the trial, conventional wisdom concludes, made Bryan’s folly and the failings of the movement visible not just locally but nationwide. Fundamentalism as a national movement died at Dayton.

This view is correct, but only up to a point. Protestant fundamentalism did die as a national movement in the mid 1920s, but not as a result of the Scopes Trial. The trial, which both sides welcomed as a chance to air their views, likely changed few minds. What ultimately finished fundamentalism as a national movement was the rise of radio and movies. These new forms of entertainment transformed America’s “common culture”: the collection of words, images, stories, and characters with which nearly all Americans were familiar. The specific elements that make up common culture change over time, as old ones fall out of fashion and new ones are added. The rise of radio and movies not only added new elements to common culture, but also reshaped its basic structure. The text-based, slow-changing worldview of the nineteenth century gave way in the 1920s to a fluid, fast-changing one that included audiovisual elements.

Protestant fundamentalism, conceived as a response to a much-narrower set of changes within the old culture, was ill-equipped to deal with the systemic changes wrought by movies and radio. It faded from the national scene not because of a public-relations catastrophe, but because it could not effectively make its message heard. The real significance of the Scopes Trial
lies in the presence of radio reporters outside the courthouse. The existence of the radio reporters in Dayton ultimately had more to do with the decline of fundamentalism than anything Bryan or Darrow said in the courthouse.

Fundamentalism was an inherently proud conservative movement. It existed in order to defend the centerpiece of the older, text-based common culture: the Protestant Bible. The movement owed its existence to a perception, among its founders and the clergy that they recruited, that the Bible was under siege. Liberal scholars, applying the principles of the innocuously-named “higher criticism,” argued that the Bible should be interpreted as any other historical document would be—as the product of human writers addressing a human audience in a particular place and time. To conservative Christians such an approach smacked of infidelity. It seemed to deny the divine inspiration of Scripture. It invited the interpretation of Scripture as metaphor, rather than literal truth. Most troubling, it threatened to turn Scripture from a source of absolute, transcendent moral authority into one in which meaning varied.

The fundamentalist agenda expanded after World War I to include attacks on Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and its inclusion in the public-school curriculum. This segue from Bible to biology reflected fundamentalist leaders’ belief that Darwinism, like higher criticism, threatened to undermine Christianity. Darwinism rankled the most conservative fundamentalists because it could not be reconciled with a literal reading of Genesis. There was room in Darwin’s universe for creation, but not for a Creation of the world and all its inhabitants in six days of twenty-four hours each. The issue of human origins was more broadly disturbing. Evolutionists claimed a common ancestry for apes and humans. Much of the public, however, interpreted this as the very different claim that apes were the ancestors of humans. The former claim troubled conservative Christians of the fundamentalist movement. The latter appalled them. Both claims blurred the line between humans and the “lower animals.” They threatened human’s status as unique beings made in the image of their Creator. Fundamentalist leaders feared that Darwinism’s equation of man and animal would inevitably lead to a lowering of moral standards. German aggression in the just-finished war confirmed their fears, as did the sensational kidnapping-murder of Bobby Franks by teenagers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, who were defended by Darwin. Prosecutors cited both cases at the Scopes Trial. Look, they seemed to say, at what Darwinism hath wrought.

Fundamentalists sought to defend the Bible, and the doctrines built on it, from these threats. They urged their followers to embrace tradition and reject modern attempts to erode or overturn it. They saw themselves as guardians of the moral authority of the Bible, and of those who—rejecting the false prophets of modernism—maintained a pure, unqualified faith. Like many other protest movements born in tumultuous times, fundamentalism saw the past as a time of untroubled simplicity and the present as a time of troubling, ambiguous complexity.

Consciously or not, the fundamentalists’ methods underscored their message. The movement spread its message face-to-face. Ministers carried its message to their congregations, revivalists to their followers, and Chautauqua speakers to their audiences. Potential converts to the movement heard its message in churches, tents, and halls filled with their friends and neighbors. Nationwide, the demographics of the movement were complex, but individual audiences tended to be geographically and culturally homogeneous. Any given member of such an audience could, by looking around, see a community united by shared values. The meetings personalized fundamentalist claims that such values, and such communities, were endangered by modernist claims that such values, and such communities, were endangered by modernist attacks on the Bible and the doctrines derived from it.

The villains of the fundamentalist universe stood outside of any such traditional community. They were the self-proclaimed intellectual elite: dwellers in the ivory towers of universities. Isolated from ordinary people and the rhythms of everyday life, they had lost their own faith to the false doctrines of Darwinism and higher criticism. Fundamentalists believed that these scholars sought to spread their poisonous ideas through the seminaries and public schools. Left unopposed they would destroy the uncomplicated, traditional faith of the People—a faith that they could not understand. The culture wars of the 1920s were, for fundamentalists, analogous to the political struggles of the Populists in the 1890s: a contest between the virtuous masses and a corrupt elite. Fundamentalists who led the antievolution campaign used explicitly populist arguments. The right of a community to choose what its children would learn was, these leaders argued, absolute. If a town or state chose to protect traditional values by declaring evolution off-limits, no self-proclaimed experts should have the right to say otherwise.

Fundamentalism assumed the existence of a stable common culture, built around the Bible, that gave strength and spiritual sustenance to America and the local communities of which it was comprised. It attributed the social ills of the new century to the gradual erosion of that culture. Even as fundamentalists rallied in support of the Bible and the common culture that it
In this passage from a 1922 sermon, the noted preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick denounced the fundamentalist position.

Here in the Christian churches are these two groups of people and the question which the Fundamentalists raise is this—Shall one of them throw the other out? Has intolerance any contribution to make to this situation? Will it persuade anybody of anything? Is not the Christian Church large enough to hold within her hospitable fellowship people who differ on points like this and agree to differ until the fuller truth be manifested? The Fundamentalists say not. They say the liberals must go. Well, if the Fundamentalists should succeed, then out of the Christian Church would go some of the best Christian life and consecration of this generation—multitudes of men and women, devout and reverent Christians, who need the church and whom the church needs.

Consider another matter on which there is a sincere difference of opinion between evangelical Christians: the inspiration of the Bible. One point of view is that the original documents of the Scripture were inerrantly dictated by God to men. Whether we deal with the story of creation or the list of the dukes of Edom or the narratives of Solomon’s reign or the Sermon on the Mount or the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, they all came in the same way, and they all came as no other book ever came. They were inerrantly dictated; everything there—scientific opinions, medical theories, historical judgments, as well as spiritual insight—is infallible. That is one idea of the Bible’s inspiration. But side by side with those who hold it, lovers of the Book as much as they, are multitudes of people who never think about the Bible so. Indeed, that static and mechanical theory of inspiration seems to them a positive peril to the spiritual life. . . .

As I plead thus for an intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving church, I am, of course, thinking primarily about this new generation. We have boys and girls growing up in our homes and schools, and because we love them we may well wonder about the church which will be waiting to receive them. Now, the worst kind of church that can possibly be offered to the allegiance of this new generation is an intolerant church. Ministers often bewail the fact that young people turn from religion to science for the regulative ideas of their lives. But this is easily explicable.

Science treats a young man’s mind as though it were really important. A scientist says to a young man, “Here is the universe challenging our investigation. Here are the truths which we have seen, so far. Come, study with us! See what we already have seen and then look further to see more, for science is an intellectual adventure for the truth.” Can you imagine any man who is worthwhile turning from that call to the church if the church seems to him to say, “Come, and we will feed you opinions from a spoon. No thinking is allowed here except such as brings you to certain specified, predetermined conclusions. These prescribed opinions we will give you in advance of your thinking; now think, but only so as to reach these results.”

My friends, nothing in all the world is so much worth thinking of as God, Christ, the Bible, sin and salvation, the divine purposes for humankind, life everlasting. But you cannot challenge the dedicated thinking of this generation to these sublime themes upon any such terms as are laid down by an intolerant church. . . .

The present world situation smells to heaven! And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ’s name and for Christ’s sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!

Well, they are not going to do it; certainly not in this vicinity. I do not even know in this congregation whether anybody has been tempted to be a Fundamentalist. Never in this church have I caught one accent of intolerance. God keep us always so and ever increasing areas of the Christian fellowship; intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, tolerant, not with the tolerance of indifference, as though we did not care about the faith, but because always our major emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the law.

anchored, that culture was changing in ways far more comprehensive than they had envisioned. The rise of movies and radio added an audiovisual dimension to what had been a collection of texts. Equally important, the growing significance of these new technologies meant that a substantial part of the common culture was now subject to the demands of the marketplace. The programming offered by the new mass media represented its producers’ best attempts to, in the timeless show-business tradition, “give the people what they wanted” on a weekly or even daily basis.

The rise of national radio networks and the consolidation of Hollywood’s studios were keys to this transformation. As the expansion of chain stores standardized retailing in the 1920s, so too did the rise of radio and movies standardize entertainment. People from Bangor to Bakersfield could buy the same goods; they could tune on their radio or buy a movie ticket and experience the same entertainment. The product, in each case, would be not just generally similar but identical. Moviegoers saw not just a production of Lew Wallace’s novel Ben-Hur, but the same production, with Ramon Novarro speaking his lines and racing his chariot in exactly the same way. Radio listeners heard not just an orchestra performance, but the same performance of the Philadelphia Orchestra, as the great Leopold Stokowski conducted it on that particular Sunday afternoon. Radio and movies thus accomplished what, until then, could only be done by the printed word, and did it for audiences far larger than most books could reach.

The advent of radio and the movies as nationwide entertainment also changed the common culture. Texts from the old culture remained stable for generations. Radio and movies were commercial enterprises whose success depended on drawing audiences back day after day and week after week. They cultivated the new and spectacular on the grounds that such attractions drew larger audiences than the familiar and prosaic. The road to success, network and studio executives believed, was to provide a succession of variations on familiar formulas. The fund of shared stories, people, and words that made up common culture thus expanded dramatically. At the same time, however, the common culture as a whole became far more fluid. New elements could enter it rapidly, only to fade away almost as rapidly. The most durable elements that early radio and movies added were formulas and stock characters, not specific incarnations in specific stories. Nobody but movie buffs now remembers specific movie starring Charlie Chaplin, but Chaplin’s “little tramp” character remains instantly recognizable—so much so that IBM featured him in a 1980s advertising campaign for its computers.

Finally, the rise of radio and movies also changed the content of the common culture. The most familiar texts from the old culture—parts of the Bible, of William Shakespeare’s plays, of Charles Dickens’s stories—had been composed by authors separated from modern Americans by time and culture. Radio and movies were, by contrast, gloriously, enthusiastically up-to-date. Radio’s as-it-happens broadcasts placed listeners virtually at the scene of championship boxing matches, baseball games, and jazz concerts. Programs such as “Your Hit Parade” kept listeners abreast of the latest popular songs. Movies dramatized the sweeping social and cultural transformations of the 1920s, especially the revolution in sexual attitudes. Sometimes they did so explicitly, as when Rudolf Valentino modeled a dark, intensely emotional male sexuality in stories set in foreign lands and past times. Sometimes they did so obliquely, as when Joan Crawford in Our Dancing Daughters (1928) and Our Modern Maidens (1929) drank, smoked, danced the Charleston, and lived happily with a lover after divorcing her husband. Over time these images and sounds became more pervasive, though not necessarily more influential, than the text-based elements of the older culture.

Old and new elements of the common culture—textual and audiovisual—did not compete in all-or-nothing terms. They coexisted, as they continue to do to this day, but this situation put the fundamentalists in an unenviable position. They had set out to defend a common culture defined by its stability and reverence for tradition and focused their attention on what they saw as its towering: the Bible. No other text, they felt, so strongly embodied the cultural links that bound past and present. The rise of radio and movies changed the rules of the game even as fundamentalist leaders tried to play it. The common culture began to embody precisely those aspects of modern life that fundamentalists found most troubling: impermanence, an obsession with novelty, and a fascination with worldly pleasures.

Fundamentalism continued to enjoy local successes, and even regional ones, in the 1920s. The ability of its leaders to unite cohesive audiences and rouse them to action remained substantial. These successes came, however, mostly in areas such as the rural South, where reverence for tradition and suspicion of the modern were already deeply ingrained. Nationwide, fundamentalism could no longer compete effectively in the marketplace of ideas. Radio and movies could reach more people, more regularly, with words and
images that were—at least superficially—more interesting to more people than anything the fundamentalists had to offer. Fundamentalist leaders had long believed that their enemy lurked in the halls of academia, but they were wrong. The real enemy was not Darrow or even Darwin, but the flickering image of Crawford on a movie screen and the sound of Paul Whiteman’s orchestra cutting through the crackle of static.

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