Science and the Sacred: The Evolution Controversy at Baylor, 1920-1929

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By 1920, most Americans knew of the theory of evolution. In the Gilded Age such well-known Protestant thinkers as Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbot wrote on evolution and tried to reconcile some aspects of Darwinian thought with Christianity. Often called modernists, these men and other liberal thinkers did not win the theological battle outright, however. The growing secularization of the Gilded Age and the further inroads of liberal theology and higher biblical criticism led many conservative Christians to believe that the basic truths of their faith were under assault. Consequently the publishing of a multi-volume work, *The Fundamentals*, between 1910-1915, had as its goal the defense of divine inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible. The next decade saw these fundamentalists lead a nationwide movement against evolution and modernism.

The fundamentalists reacted to a post-war apathy towards institutional protestantism, the spread of the teaching of evolution in the public schools, and the belief that there was a growing skepticism among America's youth. They also felt that the American family was disintegrating, and pointed to the nation's increased divorce rate as evidence of this fact. They also related recent political events to evolution. They linked the horrors of German aggression during World War I to Nietzsche, a "neurotic German philosopher," who "hypnotized the German mind with his pagan brute philosophy" that could be traced back to Charles Darwin. In their minds, Darwin's principle of "might is right" did not die with Germany's defeat. Rather, it took on a new appearance in the atheistic communism of Russia. All these factors, then, led fundamentalists to maintain that the foundations of Christian America lay in peril, and they traced nearly every social, political, and religious difficulty to the theory and teaching of evolution. For these reasons anti-evolution became the shibboleth of the fundamentalist movement in a nationwide controversy that reached its climax in the 1920s. In its wake the controversy placed a serious challenge at the doors of academic freedom in Texas and the rest of the nation was well.

As president of a Baptist university during the evolution controversy, Samuel Palmer Brooks, the son of a Baptist minister and a graduate of Baylor and of Yale University, showed remarkable resolve in balancing the fundamental truths of the Baptist denomination with the dictates of academic freedom. The evolution controversy that erupted at Baylor in the 1920s was significant for two reasons. It represented an important chapter in the history of one of the largest denominations in Texas as well.

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as a major assault on the principles of academic freedom. In its wake, the controversy confused, if not divided, the Baptists, spawned a caustic war of words in the Baptist press, and resulted in the resignations and maligned character of several competent teachers. Baylor thus was an example of several secular and denominational colleges which faced this major challenge to preserve the integrity of education.

The controversy began in 1920 when Grove S. Dow, a professor of Sociology at Baylor, published a textbook. As soon as his *Introduction to the Principles of Sociology* came off Baylor's press it generated a heated debate. Fundamentalists took exception to two particular statements in Dow's work. Dow stated that primitive man was "about halfway between the anthropoid ape and modern man." Regarding the origin of man, he said, science was even more uncertain. Scientists simply did not know whether man descended from a single pair, and further the Bible itself was not clear — "at least our interpretation of the Bible does not clear up the matter."2

These statements rubbed the fundamentalist sensibilities of many Baptists the wrong way. That same year Jasper C. Massee, president of the newly-formed World's Christian Fundamentals Association, had warned against false teachers in Baptist colleges and seminaries. Concerned fundamentalists charged that professors at Baylor were "teaching Evolution as certainly as Darwin did and other infidelicnonsense [sic]." In the Summer of 1921, Lee R. Scarborough, the president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, warned Brooks that confidential information revealed that three or four Baptist newspapers were going to mount a vigorous campaign against rationalism, evolution, and destructive criticism of the Bible because it was having an adverse effect on public education and the Baptist schools.3

Possibly under this mounting pressure, Dow responded to his critics. He admitted mistakes in the way he phrased certain "objectionable" parts of his *Introduction*. He asserted that these passages did not convey his true intent. He then published a creedal statement in the *Baptist Standard* that reaffirmed his Christian and Baptist fidelity. Despite Dow's text being adopted by several colleges and universities, he immediately began to make acceptable revisions for a new edition.4

Dow's recantation was not sufficient for many fundamentalists. Moreover, both Dow and his course were popular at Baylor, and possibly fundamentalists saw his popularity as too great a threat to orthodoxy. The school newspaper, *The Lariat*, defended Dow, pointing out "the difference between the great truth of evolution of all forms within the special limits, and the antiquated materialism of an atheistic zoologist." Hundreds of students supported Dow in a petition. Further, the students issued a statement testifying that Dow had taught the theory along with other theories only to give the students some understanding of these theories, and that he had repudiated the Darwinian theory both in class and in
With the onset of the new school year in the Fall of 1921, the Dow controversy worsened. This resulted largely from the efforts of J. Frank Norris. As the leading critic of Baylor, he more than any other person, was responsible for prolonging the controversy for nearly a decade. Like Brooks, Norris was a Baylor graduate. While at Baylor, he announced his desire "to preach in the greatest church and pulpit in the world." Norris also was graduated from the Baptist seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1909 his wish was fulfilled. He was called to the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, which grew to be the largest Protestant church in the nation. His aggressive, flamboyant style, and his relentless campaign against alcohol, prostitution, and corrupt politics led one admirer to describe him as a "militant churchman of the modern type .... If a fellow throws a brick-bat at him, the thrower can count on getting two back." Norris knew the power of the written word and he used it effectively. He served as editor of the Baptist Standard, the major organ of Texas Baptists, but 1902 he resigned because of a disagreement with denominational leaders over his flair and sensationalism. Later he started his own newspapers, the Searchlight and Fundamentalist. Thriving on controversy, uncompromising, and with a penchant for showmanship and sensationalism, Norris used his papers to attack Baylor and its "infidels." Throughout this "heresy hunt," with a circulation of over 150,000 at their peak, his papers kept Baptists confused and divided and helped prolong the controversy.

The Searchlight published excerpts from Dow's book in October 1921. Norris accused Dow of teaching "rank Darwinism" and chastised the Baptist Standard, a paper sympathetic to Baylor, for not publishing all the facts concerning the case. Throughout the Fall semester, Norris' attacks continued. He discovered a Baylor graduate at the seminary in Fort Worth "all shot through and through with Prof. Dow's evolutionary rot." He further charged that for fifteen years Baylor had been guilty of teaching unsound doctrines. Norris charged Brooks with a coverup, and the minister assured his readers that he would continue to "smoke out the infidels." He also used the pulpit at both his church and revivals to preach against "the professor apes [who] think they have a monopoly (sic) on knowledge."

The attacks had their desired effect. Brooks' correspondence swelled with letters from protesting parents with children at Baylor and from confused Baptists across the state. One parent wrote, he would "rather his son go without [a] college education rather than have him attend the classes of a man who teaches Darwinianism in the smallest degree." Dow resigned, and with a certain prescience he summed up the problem: "the south does not yet understand the term 'evolution'; when you say evolution people immediately think of monkey." "It will be 25 years," he continued, "before they thresh the thing out in this part of the country." Brooks, despite Norris' protests, refused to accept Dow's resignation until the end of the school year.
Inevitably, in 1921 the controversy found its way to the Baptist state convention. Brooks, knowing that Norris was going to make an issue of Dow's textbook and Darwinism at Baylor, upstaged the Fort Worth minister and called for an investigation. The convention passed a resolution opposing the "teaching of Darwinian evolution, or any other teaching which discredits the Genesis account of creation." The committee appointed to investigate the teaching in Texas Baptist schools cleared Baylor. They found no instances of a teacher who believed in Darwinian evolution as a fact or taught it as such. The committee found two biology professors at Baylor who subscribed to some phases of evolution, Lula Pace and L.O. Bradbury. While they viewed the fall of man in the Genesis account as historical, they believed the first three chapters of Genesis were "illustrative or allegorical."

Norris remained unsatisfied. The committee rejected his requests for open hearings and a chance to interview the professors personally. He claimed that he possessed evidence indicating that presidents of Baptist schools had prohibited students with damaging evidence to appear before the committee. Tension mounted as the date grew closer for the General Convention. Norris was not the only one dissatisfied with the report. Benjamin A. Copass, an Old Testament professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, received numerous letters of protest concerning Pace and Bradbury. Copass wrote Brooks about the dissatisfaction of some Baptists and told him that one former student would testify at the convention that Pace had taught evolution of the "rankest type." Even Scarborough, who faithfully supported Baylor throughout the controversy, wrote Brooks citing the case of his own brother, who learned the theory in Pace's class, "and was now a moralist and a rationalist."10

If Baptists expected a tumultuous convention in 1922, they were not disappointed. One minister counseled silence on the matter. He pointed out that once Baptist schools began to "capitulate" to men who were not specialists in the fields of science and interpreting the Bible, then these schools would "begin to lose out in the educational world, and their graduates will be looked upon as ninnies." The convention would not be silent on the matter. Described as one of the "most stormy sessions the Baptists had had in the last twenty-five years," the Convention adopted the Investigation Committee's report and passed another resolution supporting the Genesis account of the origin of man.11

The annual General Conventions of 1923-1927 took up the evolution question in one way or another. This largely was due to the agitation of Norris. Moreover, 1923 was an important year for the controversy in Austin as well. State representative J.T. Stroder, a Baptist concerned with the teaching of evolution at Baylor as well as the University of Texas, introduced a bill in the Texas House of Representatives to ban the teaching of evolution in state schools. He argued that such teaching violated the constitution of church and state and religious freedom as stated in the Texas constitution.
Constitution. The bill passed in the House, but died in the Education Committee in the Senate. Stroder believed that "German Rationalism" and "Atheistic Evolution" were synonymous. According to him, Germany had "planted in American Universities pernicious policies or doctrines which she desires to foist upon our unsuspecting minds." Among some twenty-six "curses," he included "atheism," "materialism," "no God theory," and "Bolshevism." All of these could be found in German Rationalism. Convinced that the evolution controversy was a plot to subvert American youth and culture, he called for resignations at Baylor and the removal of "rationalists" who taught at the University of Texas.12

In 1923 the General Convention refused to seat Norris' delegates by a vote of 811 to thirty-one. With similar problems expected at the convention in 1924, one leading Baptist urged Baylor's Board of Trustees to issue a statement to prevent the possibility of "our coming to the Convention with a bad atmosphere growing out of misapprehensions." Brooks presented a statement signed by seventy-six members of the Baylor faculty acknowledging the fundamentals of their faith. Dale Crowley, a Baylor student already embroiled in the controversy, submitted a resolution calling for all instructors in Baptist schools to sign doctrinal statements. The resolution committee voted down the resolution, arguing "that such a statement should be prepared by a representative of a nonpartisan committee." The convention unanimously adopted a resolution passed by the Southern Baptist Convention that year opposing evolution and reiterating the fundamentals of the Baptist faith.13

By 1925 the controversy still would not die. Originally, Norris planned to travel to Dayton, Tennessee, to provide William Jennings Bryan with "religious counsel" at the Scopes Trial. An article in the New York Times alerted readers that Norris had studied the case carefully and would be well prepared. Although Norris was unable to attend the trial, Bryan wrote to thank him for getting involved in the case, announcing, "It woke up the country."14

The Southern Baptist Convention met in Memphis, Tennessee, that year. At the convention the Committee on Articles of Faith put forward a statement based on the Genesis account of creation. Brooks attended and voted his approval. At the General Convention in Mineral Wells, Texas, Josiah B. Tidwell, head of the Bible department at Baylor, delivered an address on "The Genesis Story of Creation." Brooks, as well as Norris, endorsed the speech, and Baylor printed copies because of the orthodoxy of the address and the tremendous demand for it. In Austin the anti-evolutionist faction in the House passed another bill prohibiting the teaching of evolution in state schools. Again the bill died in the Senate, but this time Governor Miriam A. Ferguson intervened. Using her position as head of the Textbook Commission, she guided through a proposal which eliminated all references to evolution from public school textbooks.15

In 1926, Brooks reported to the Convention that teachers had not
been added to the faculty unless they signed the articles of faith presented in 1924. At the Southern Baptist Convention held in Houston that year, a resolution reaffirmed Genesis and rejected any theory which taught that man originated from a lower “animal ancestry.” Finally, in 1927 the Convention passed a resolution expressing its disapproval of the “baseless, malicious, and conscienceless warfare against our leaders in missions, in education, in hospitals, and in those in other lines of work.”

Norris was little dissuaded by these actions of the General Conventions, despite his tearful apology and promise to cease such attacks at the convention in 1923. As a strict literalist, he believed any degree of evolution would have threatened the integrity of the Bible. The notion of theistic evolution was out of the question in his mind. This accounts for his rejection of Pace and Bradbury’s statements during the convention and investigation. As a result, he stepped up his charges against them and other members of Baylor’s faculty. Nearly every issue of the Searchlight, scornfully called the “Smirchlight” by Brooks, carried articles on Baylor. In the Spring of 1923, the newspaper ran an article claiming that students had revolted against Brooks and demanded his resignation. Norris contended that this was the inevitable and logical consequence of the kind of teaching that had been going on at Baylor. The Baylor faculty issued a statement which labeled Norris’ charges as a “gross misrepresentation,” and pointed out student-faculty relations were quite cordial. Moreover, Brooks refused to consent to an invitation to William Jennings Bryan to speak at Baylor that year, fearing that Norris would take it as a personal victory and claim that he brought Bryan to Texas himself.

The controversy intensified with the Crowley-Fothergill affair. Dale Crowley, a “young theologian with far more zeal than knowledge,” attended a pastor’s conference in Houston where he attacked Brooks for being a “heretic” and accused C.S. Fothergill, a member of the Baylor faculty, of teaching evolution. Apparently rebuffed by Brooks, Crowley took his story to Norris. The Searchlight exacerbated the affair, reporting on it almost weekly. The paper quoted a statement supposedly made to Crowley by Brooks in which the president stated that he believed that “man was created by process.” Brooks, breaking an eleven-month silence on the controversy, responded by accusing Norris of offering rewards of $100 and $200 to students to act as spies. The faculty voted unanimously to sanction a statement written by Brooks and signed by Governor Pat Neff, the chairman of the Baylor’s Board of Trustees. Meanwhile, on October 10, 1924 the Searchlight featured a page-one cartoon of Crowley plunging a dagger into the head of a huge snake labeled, “EVOLUTION IN BAYLOR.” Crowley briefly edited The Sword, a news sheet, featuring an article titled “Fair Play or Foul Play?” in which he defended his position. The faculty met and passed a resolution suspending him indefinitely for charging Baylor with endorsing “the rankest form of infidelity.”

Norris charged Brooks with destroying the principle of free speech.
among Texas Baptists. Crowley, unwilling to accept his suspension, requested a hearing before the Board of Trustees, but Brooks refused. Crowley took his case to a lawyer and released all the correspondence concerning his suspension to the *Houston Chronicle*. At his lawyer’s request, Crowley received a hearing, but he was not readmitted to Baylor.¹⁹

The pressure on Fothergill resulted in his resignation. Much like Dow, he denied all the charges and pointed out that his life’s work was much too important to continue in such a difficult situation. The *Searchlight* carried a headline in huge red letters across the front page: “PROFESSOR FOTHERGILL, ANOTHER EVOLUTIONIST AT BAYLOR, RESIGNS—Crowley vindicated.”²⁰

The controversy had an adverse effect on the denomination throughout the state. The “’75 Million Campaign,” a major fund raising effort to liquidate the Southern Baptist Conventions’ debt, in particular was vulnerable because monies from the campaign helped support Baptist schools. Clearly, many Baptists were unwilling to give money to a school that they believed undermined the fundamentals of their faith.

Despite Brooks’ best efforts to end the controversy, many Baptists remained unconvinced that evolution was not being taught at Baylor. The Parker County Baptist Association passed a resolution charging Baylor with teaching a theory of evolution which denied the inspiration of the scriptures and the biblical account of the creation of all things. Brooks denied the charges and reminded the Association of the report of the investigation committee the previous year. In December 1923, Brooks published a lengthy article in the *Baylor Bulletin* in which he tried once again to lay the controversy to rest. He concluded that no teachers at Baylor ever had been “fundamentally wrong” in their teaching. The Tarrant County Baptist Association rejected Brooks’ statement because books containing evolutionary teaching had been discontinued as texts and teachers had resigned.²¹

A pattern in the evolution controversy at Baylor had developed by 1924. Norris would receive information from one of his supporters that a faculty member at Baylor had evolutionary leanings. He used the *Searchlight* or the *Fundamentalist* to attack the teacher. The accused professor would respond by denying the charge, to no avail. In this manner, Norris continued his attacks against Pace, Bradbury, and J.L. Kesler, the dean of the medical school. He also charged the W.P. Meroney, Dow’s successor in the sociology department, taught “‘beast ancestry.” Norris similarly accused at least four other Baylor faculty members. This pattern continued until the end of the decade.

As late as 1927, fundamentalists in other parts of the country were still following the controversy at Baylor. Brooks received a letter from William Bell Riley, one of the major spokesmen for the movement and one of the founders of the Anti-Evolution League of America. Riley
inquired as to whether Baylor was on the list of the Fundamentalist Colleges of America and if so, did it correctly belong there? In a similar vein, one of the national speakers of the League wrote to ask Brooks if he believed in evolution?²²

An incident that same year, however, marked a turning point in the controversy. Until then, Brooks demonstrated remarkable patience in dealing with Norris and other accusers. Norris had extended several speaking invitations to Brooks that Brooks ignored. Believing in “the good old Baptist and American way of meeting things frankly, openly and aboveboard,” Norris asked Brooks again to come and deliver an address at Norris’ radio station in Fort Worth. This time Brooks accepted. Brooks was joined on the broadcast by Frank S. Groner, a former attorney-turned-minister and the executive secretary of the General Baptist Convention. Both bitterly denounced Norris over his own radio station for his sustained attacks on Brooks and upon Baylor. Groner’s broadside, “Norrisism and it’s Fruits,” was more caustic than Brooks. Groner called Norris’ charges “cruel lies” and accused him of “slander, vituperation, inuendo, calumny, misrepresentations, falsehoods, and lies.”²³

For some reason Norris’ rebuttal was cut off the radio in Fort Worth. One man suggested that Norris did it himself so he could accuse foes of the First Baptist Church with tampering with the radio. Norris called it a “hatefest.” Meanwhile, Brooks received dozens of letters of support. Norris continued to attack Brooks and Baylor, but the radio broadcast vitiated much of his press’s sensationalism.²⁴

The evolution controversy at Baylor raised a number of important questions. It also had important ramifications for the religious history of Texas. What was the effect of the controversy on the denomination throughout the 1920s. Was evolution actually taught at Baylor? Was Norris an opportunist interested in bolstering his own image and the circulation of his newspapers? Or was he genuinely concerned with heresy at Baylor?

Dow’s remarks when he resigned from Baylor underscored the misconception of evolution in the South in the 1920s. Many Baptists, both urban and rural, misunderstood the theory. For example, State Representative J.T. Stroder considered evolution his “forte,” yet he believed that the theory of evolution held that man originally “sprang from a protoplasm, to a tadpole, to a polliwog, to a grog, to a monkey, to an ape, to a baboon, to a ‘guerilla,’ to a bear, to a Chinaman, to a jap, to a negro, to a whiteman.” Stroder did not explain what a grog was, but felt sufficiently knowledgeable to appoint himself spokesman for a number of Baptists and to push for a bill against teaching evolution in Texas schools. Another Baptist, summing up the misconceptions about evolution theory in the countryside, wrote that “quite a number of the brethren coming from the rural districts altogether unacquainted with the thought forms of literature and philosophy have set themselves up as critics.” He chastised such Baptists for presuming to criticize those things “about which they
had not the remotest understanding."

Further misunderstanding linked evolution to German rationalism, atheism, and communism. Many Baptists, as well as members of other denominations, thought that the acceptance of evolution would undermine morality. They felt that if man believed he descended from apes he would justify the release of his animal instincts and wreak havoc on the social order. Finally, many believed that the acceptance of the theory would necessarily contradict the inspired revelation and inerrancy of the Scriptures — "If there was one portion of the Scriptures untrue, the whole of it went for nothing." Because of these conceptions, the ordinary Baptist equated all evolution with Darwinian evolution. Understandably, when Baylor was accused of harboring teachers of evolution on its faculty, many Baptists were alarmed.

The controversy benefited the denomination by forcing the Baptists to address the issue. For several decades many biblical scholars failed to reconcile fundamentalism with advances made in higher criticism and science. The science faculty at Baylor, in attempting to effect such a reconciliation, made two major contributions. First, many Baptists developed an awareness that the theory of evolution took many forms and degrees. Theistic evolution became a possibility. One Baptist put the question very well when he asked, "What is there in theistic evolution, as expounded by many of the ablest scientists and theologians, that is inconsistent with reverent and genuine religion as revealed and taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount."

Clearly, this philosophical assumption stood a far greater chance of receiving a hearing in biblical scholarship because the credibility of the Bible could be upheld. Secondly, largely through the efforts of Brooks, the principle of academic freedom in the denominational schools was upheld. It is significant that Baylor's president never asked for any faculty member's resignation because of the controversy. Rather, he maintained the freedom of his faculty to acquaint the students with all forms of knowledge. Somewhat sarcastically, he wrote one critic to explain that a sociology professor would teach the students about various policies pursued in Europe and America regarding prostitution and other forms of social vice. This did not mean, however, that the professor actually endorsed such vice. Through such actions Brooks insured Baylor's credibility as an educational institution in the academic community.

Was evolution, in fact, taught at Baylor? One must distinguish between the professors' personal beliefs and what they taught as personal opinion and what they taught in an effort to acquaint the students with all theories in sociology and biology. The evidence does not suggest any professor subscribed to an atheistic theory of evolution. Brooks knew when he hired Kesler as dean of the medical school that he was an evolutionist. But Kesler was highly competent and acknowledged his belief in the Bible. This was fifteen years before the controversy began, and it attested to
Brooks' openmindedness. Professors Dow, Pace, Bradbury, Fothergill, and Meroney, all scientists as well as Baptists, believed in some form of evolution. However, all signed or issued statements attesting to the historical facts of "Genesis" and the belief that God created all things. This insight, one apparently closed to the more militant fundamentalist, was that God could have used the evolutionary process to create man. Indeed, Brooks seemed to have leaned towards this belief himself, and he clearly hired teachers who did. Addressing the Baptist Youth Union, he stated that God had placed man on earth in a state of savagery to work out his own salvation. This was certainly at variance with a strict literalist interpretation of Genesis. 

The ominous connotations of the use of the term "evolution" resulted in a careful choice of words. Brooks took pains to point out that no professor endorsed the theory of Darwinian evolution. B.A. Copass, defending Pace and Bradbury, pointed out, they "are not evolutionist as evolution is defined, they simply believe in the law of development within the species." In the future, he chided teachers, "Be careful of your terminology ... Do not say 'evolutionist,' say 'development.'" 

A textbook problem made the teaching of evolution at Baylor unavoidable. There were no adequate biology and sociology textbooks published in the 1920s that did not contain some evolutionary theory. Books omitting the theory of evolution fell below acceptable standards for college texts. Professors could hardly ignore the evolutionary chapters in the texts, although one academician suggested these chapters "are the best opportunity to show how weak the arguments for the doctrine are." In 1924, the General Convention established a textbook commission to insure the orthodoxy of texts used in Baptist schools. Herbert Gambrell, a Methodist and the managing editor of the Southwest Review, who attended the convention, offered a facitious suggestion that the Convention hire someone to write textbooks. After a manuscript was finished, run off 500,000 copies and send one to every Baptist in the state. Each person would delete the objectionable portions, incorporate their own suggestions, and return the revised manuscript. When all 500,000 copies were returned the author could incorporate all suggestions, and delete all the unacceptable passages. As he pointed out, the plan was perfectly democratic. "The resultant text-book would be a marvel of unity, coherence and emphasis, to say nothing of accuracy; and, once in its final form would need no revision until the present generation has passed away." The proposal, while intentionally ludricious, underscored the problem of adequate textbooks and academic freedom.

Finally, there remains the question of J. Frank Norris. Was he convinced evolution was being taught at Baylor? Egotistical, an iconoclast, Norris probably used Baylor to focus attention on himself and boost circulation of his weeklies. By no means modest, he frequently boasted that he preached in the largest church and edited the religious paper with the
largest circulation in the country. Norris characterized himself as a minister doing the Lord's work in the face of adversity, and he remained popular with many Baptists. According to his friends, only Billy Sunday could attract more people to a religious meeting. The Searchlight and the Fundamentalist undoubtedly benefited from the controversy. Announcing, "THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S," his paper's advertisement for new subscriptions urged readers to invest in the Searchlight to help fight the enemy — evolution at Baylor.

Many of Norris' contemporaries questioned his motivation. George W. Carrol, one of the pillars of Baylor, wrote Norris, "it is not evolution so much that is worrying you, but your eagerness to be the hero that killed the snake." This summed up the sentiments of many regarding Norris in the 1920s.32

Norris, a militant fundamentalist, viewed everything in terms of black and white. Richard Hofstadter has written that the fundamentalist mind "is essentially Manichean; it looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and accordingly it scorns compromises ... and can tolerate no ambiguities." Certainly, Norris bears out this description. He refused to compromise or question his own opinions and beliefs. Unable to detect shades of meaning, he would not accept any theory of evolution. All evolution was atheistic. This explains why he charged professors with teaching Darwinian evolution. In Norris' mind, there was only one form of evolution. That Norris genuinely was concerned with the teaching of evolution revealed itself early in the controversy. "No use to fool ourselves. The damnable doctrine of evolution has its hand on the throat of our public schools, our state schools, and our denominational schools." Norris' concern transcended Baylor, although he focused much of his attention there. Like many of his day, he viewed evolution as a theory spawned by atheistic philosophy and imported to this country from Europe. He believed evolution was a real threat to Baylor and the Baptist denomination. The liberal spirit in protestantism during the 1920s disturbed him. Soon "there will just be Roman Catholics, Fundamentalists, and Modernists," he told a meeting of the Baptist Bible Union of America. Clearly, Norris approached the controversy with mixed motivations.33

The evolution controversy at Baylor left its stamp on the denomination's future. In 1929, one Baptist wrote:

Baptists have come to the forks in the road. We must either take the route of the ignorant and illiterate ... or we must be able to interpret our belief in such terms and with such argument as will challenge the intelligence and interest of the world in which we live.

Science could be reconciled with the sacred.14


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