

On Trial: The Right to Think

THOMAS R. MCDANIEL

I recently watched a remake of *Inherit the Wind*, the classic film about the 1927 Scopes Trial. In that famous case, defense lawyer Clarence Darrow took on fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan in a spirited debate about Charles Darwin's scientific treatise *Origin of Species* and the notion of evolution. This so-called "monkey trial" tested the narrow question: "Did biology teacher John Scopes break a Tennessee law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the state's public schools?" The answer was clearly yes, guilty as charged, and Scopes was fined \$100.

The judge would not admit scientific testimony nor open the debate to the broader question: "Should students be taught ideas that conflict with traditional religious beliefs and community values?" Or, as the Bryan character (played by Kirk Douglas) put it, "Can we ever permit learning that promotes godlessness in our schools?" The judge in the movie took away much of Darrow's argument by declaring, "The right to think is not on trial!"

It seems to me that in our own day the "right to think" is indeed on trial, in the media and in state legislatures as well as in the courtroom. Public schools are seeing a resurgence of protest from fundamentalists and from grass roots community groups led by ultra-conservative politicians. In the Scopes trial, the villains are science

and the secular thought that challenges religious orthodoxy. In the movie's conclusion the Darrow character (played by Jason Robards) says to the biology teacher, "You don't think that anything like this is ever finished, do you?" Apparently not: we do inherit the wind.

My own state, South Carolina, is smaller, more rural, and more traditional than most. It is in the heart of the "Bible Belt." Here I see unmistakable signs blowing in the wind:

A protest of "new age" practices. Increasingly, newspaper articles, letters-to-the-editor, and sermons attack what is called "new age" thinking and practice. Crystals, channeling, the occult, Satanism, and secular humanism — combined and dressed up in "new age" clothes — are said to represent the forces of godlessness in school and society. A conservative counter-revolution is heating up in school board meetings in many localities. Schools are being exorcised of demons, old and new. For example, Venn diagrams — a philosopher's tool for analytical thought—are under scrutiny as occult symbols.

Higher-order thinking under fire. Although our state legislature mandates higher-order thinking skills in the public school curriculum, legislators are redefining this mandate in the narrow terms of Bloom's cognitive domain. Robert Marzano's *Tactics for Thinking* program is in trouble because of such "suspect methods" as visualization, meditation, and values clarification. One state legislator said on a call-in radio program, "Psychology has no place in the classroom."

Censorship on the rise. In addition to recent court cases, librarians and teachers report increasing pressure from parents and religious organizations concerned about certain literature

in the curriculum. In a neighboring county, "Puss and Boots," "Sylvester and the Magic Pebble," and "St. George and the Dragon" have been dropped from a reading program because of parental objections about magic. Programs emphasizing "decision-making skills" or student "empowerment" are also in trouble in some schools.

In many states a student's right to think is on trial. And the verdict once again is "guilty." But as Darrow asks in *Inherit the Wind*, if schools are not to challenge the mind, "Why were we plagued with the power to think?" □

Thomas R. McDaniel is Professor and Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Converse College, Spartanburg, SC 29302-0006.

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