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“Stamp Out This Awful Cancer”:

The Fear of Radicals, Atheists, and Modernism at the University of Tennessee in the 1920s

By Sarah Cansler



In the spring of 1927, several concerned Tennesseans wrote letters to the administration of the state's flagship university, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. These uneasy citizens were unable to “resist the temptation of calling . . . attention” to a scandalous article that appeared in the May 1927 issue of *World's Work* magazine.¹ In the article, “Atheism Beckons To Our Youth,” journalist Homer Croy asserted that the University of Tennessee was one of several colleges in the United States that housed a student Atheists Club.² University president Harcourt A. Morgan and dean of men Felix Massey responded to these claims by saying that there was “absolutely nothing to the story.”³

Reactions to the article revealed the contentious atmosphere of the South in the 1920s, especially within higher education. Southern educators such as Morgan and Massey worked tirelessly to protect their students from the “immoral” influences of movements, including communism and atheism which were gaining prominence across the country. They also sought to assure curious citizens and the press that such movements did not have a foothold

* The author completed a bachelor's degree in history at the University of Tennessee in May 2013. She wrote a senior thesis about female performers in the early twentieth century and intends to pursue a career in law. The author would like to thank Dr. William Bruce Wheeler for his invaluable assistance with this essay.

¹ James N. Cox to H.A. Morgan, April 25, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, President's Papers, AR-1, University of Tennessee Special Collections.

² Homer Croy, “Atheism Beckons to Our Youth,” *The World's Work*, 54 (May 1927): 19.

³ Felix M. Massey to James N. Cox, April 28, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special Collections.



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in southern schools. Across the South, there was a growing sense in higher education that allowing students too much freedom, both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities, would result in the "mental aberration" that atheism and communism would inevitably create.⁴ The highly politicized and modernist trends of the 1920s threatened to undermine the university system and its emphasis on an authoritative and paternalistic treatment of its students.

The fear that Tennessee's young minds were falling under the influence of subversive and anti-religious thought occurred only two years after the Scopes "Monkey" Trial, which pitted modernism (evolution) against more traditional values (creationism).⁵ For many Tennesseans, the results of the Scopes Trial and charges of atheism at the state's land-grant university challenged traditional American ideals which had shifted during the Great War.⁶ The reaction in the South to these "subversive" movements was especially strong, largely generating from what scholars have identified as a fear of "whatever differed from themselves and their ancient pattern" of conservatism and religious conviction.⁷

Although colleges and universities in other regions had similar concerns about their students' political and social activities, southern schools had a decidedly regional investment in these issues. The fear of radical movements prevalent after the World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution caused renewed emphasis on conservative religion and politics that promoted southern traditions and patriotism.⁸ Harcourt Morgan, president of the University of Tennessee, took this regional conservatism a step further. He was determined to structure the school according to the wishes of the legislature and the taxpayers, who mostly lived in rural areas. Fears about communism and



Harcourt Morgan, president of the University of Tennessee from 1919-1933, enforced traditional southern social values and supported a non-secular curriculum on campus. University of Tennessee Special Collections.

⁴ H.A. Morgan to J. B. Summers, June 18, 1927, Box 3, Folder 1, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁵ See, Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York, 1997); Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever?: Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* (Boston, 1958).

⁶ John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1968* (New York, 1968), 345.

⁷ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 301.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

atheism prompted Morgan to ensure that his university would continue to serve as the embodiment of traditional southern values because, in his mind, those who paid the taxes that funded the school had the right to determine the political and religious values instilled in its students.

Throughout the 1920s, Morgan's devotion to the wishes of the state's taxpayers became increasingly apparent as he eliminated obvious indications of secular thought at the University of Tennessee. In 1923, he supported the firing of several faculty members who had adopted course textbooks that included chapters on evolution. The move prompted an investigation by the American Civil Liberties Union and brought to light the issues surrounding the teaching of evolutionary thought and academic freedom. In fact, the controversy foreshadowed the Scopes Trial, which took the debates over the teaching of evolution in public schools to a national audience.⁹ By the time of Croy's article, Harcourt Morgan had already established a clear record of supporting traditional values and rejecting modernist thought at the University of Tennessee.

This essay reviews how and why the administration at the University of Tennessee reacted to real or perceived threats to traditional, southern, and Protestant values during the 1920s. It puts the details of the faculty firings, the Scopes Trial, and accusations of an Atheists Club into the larger context of the decade and the cultural changes of modernism. This essay argues that the charges of an Atheists Club at the University of Tennessee and other incidents during the 1920s revealed the tensions between the younger generations, seeking to break free from the conservatism and religiosity of their parents, and the older generations, trying to protect their children from ideas that promoted liberalism and secularism. Further, it describes the efforts of leaders in southern higher education, such as Harcourt Morgan, to protect the next generation from the encroaching cultural changes and challenges in society.

Southern Conservatism in Modern Times

At the beginning of the twentieth century, white southerners reacted to many cultural changes, which can most easily be categorized as the cultural movement known as modernism. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, scientific developments, thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, the growth of the social sciences, and other social factors eroded the culture and values of the Victorian era. This shift from Victorian to modernist culture was particularly difficult in the South. Southern intellectuals of the 1920s recognized that the region needed to "catch up" or be permanently left behind other parts of the nation. In contrast, southern

⁹ Kimberly Marinucci, "God, Darwin, and Loyalty in America: The University of Tennessee and the Great Professor Trial of 1923," *History of Intellectual Culture* 1 (2002): 1-2, 12-13.



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leaders and the majority of the population wanted to hold fast to traditions, Protestant religion, and many of the facets of Victorian culture that had developed after the Civil War.¹⁰

As part of the reaction against modernism, by the 1920s, church membership in the South swelled. These congregations embraced more conservative religious doctrines and increased their activities in an effort to undermine the anti-religious movements that contradicted scripture and traditional values.¹¹ Many of these new religious doctrines originated in the South, especially the Fundamentalist movement. Curtis Lee Laws, the editor of the Baptist publication *Watchman-Examiner*, coined the term "Fundamentalism," which referred to an emphasis on the main tenets of Christian theology in the face of increasingly liberal theology. Fundamentalism defined Biblical scripture as divinely inspired and inerrant, and emphasized sentimentality over the "coldness and formality" perceived in other religious practices. The primary aim of the movement was to use the traditional interpretations of scripture to combat the effects of modernization and secularization of American culture. The tenets of Fundamentalism were widely adopted by established denominations in the South such as the Baptists and the Presbyterians, as well as by more radical sects like the Holy Rollers. Because of the resistance of many southerners to atheism and evolutionary theory, Fundamentalism gained a solid foothold in the South.¹²

By the 1920s, the South was urban, modernized, and connected to other regions. While many rural areas of the South remained unchanged, urbanization and industrialization had changed the economy and social structure and gave southern working class men and women the hope for upward mobility. At the same time business leaders and members of the upper class resented these challenges to their social status and the influx of new Americans. Their fear contributed to a class hatred that was pointedly geared towards groups whose behavior and beliefs challenged or conflicted with southern traditions, such as African Americans, Jews, communists, and atheists. This growing social, racial, and ethnic tension contributed to the rise of the nativist groups such as the re-formed Ku Klux Klan. Southern leaders advocated traditional values of religion, white dominance, and political conservatism, in an effort to maintain their place in the social structure

¹⁰ Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), 3-10. See, Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

¹¹ Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville, 1981), 101.

¹² Ernest R. Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History* 36 (March 1967): 74; William R. Glass, *Strangers in Zion: Fundamentalists in the South, 1900-1950* (Macon, GA, 2001), x-xiii; Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 296, 298; Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History* (Knoxville, 1999), 250; Douglas Johnson, *Contending for the Faith: A History of the Evangelical Movement in the Universities and Colleges* (Leicester, England, 1979), 87-88.



and to guard against the amoral influences of communism and socialism.¹³

The southern political Progressive movement in the early twentieth century also affected the values of white leadership. While southern Progressives focused their efforts on improving infrastructure like roads and schools, they also argued strongly for more conservative social reforms, such as national Prohibition. As the leaders of southern politics and society, Progressives believed that in order to improve people's lives, they must first improve their environment by eliminating moral threats like alcohol. Furthermore, southern Progressives often worked against what they perceived as corruption in the political system. They consequently sought to limit the political agency of African Americans in urban areas. Southern Progressives believed that black votes interfered with their own political agenda to preserve traditions while improving society.¹⁴

Austin Peay, who served as governor of Tennessee from 1923-1927, embodied the spirit of the southern Progressive movement. Governor Peay focused his political efforts on an efficient and structured government that worked to build a statewide road system, to improve schools, and to bring better services to the state's rural populations. That platform appealed to many southern voters who believed that internal improvements and social reform, largely for the benefit of the white rural population, would lead to industrial growth and a stronger educational system steeped in Christian morality. However, such an allegiance to religion placed certain strictures on the curricula and student life of many southern universities, making them often seem indelibly backwards to the rest of the nation. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the case of teaching evolution in the state of Tennessee.¹⁵

The Scopes Trial of 1925 brought the nation's attention to East Tennessee and to the South as a whole. The Butler Act, passed by the Tennessee legislature in 1925, prohibited teaching evolution in public schools. Those opposed to the law wanted to test the legality of the measure. At the same time, a group of local businessmen in Dayton, Tennessee, eighty miles southwest of Knoxville, wanted to attract publicity for their small town. In cooperation with the American Civil Liberties Union, the promoters of the town arranged for John T. Scopes, a local high school teacher and football coach, to adopt a science textbook for his course that included a chapter on evolution. As a result, Scopes was fired and the state prosecuted

¹³ See, George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967).

¹⁴ Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 210; McDonald and Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee*, 41; Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, 1983), xv-xix; William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), xi-xii.

¹⁵ Bergeron, Ash, and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 237-39. See, Joseph Tant MacPherson, "Democratic Progressivism in Tennessee: The Administrations of Governor Austin Peay, 1923-1927" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1969).



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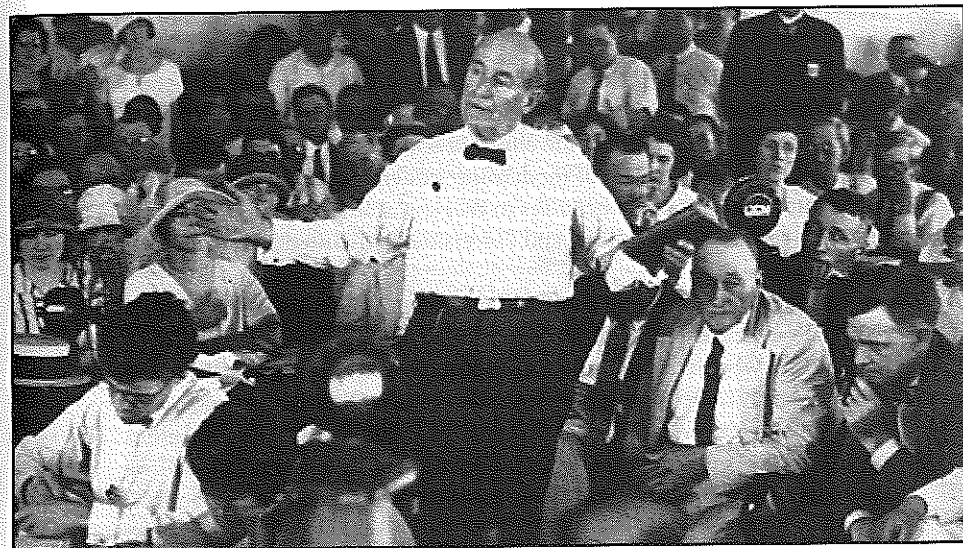
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him for violating the law that forbade teaching evolution in the classroom. National interest in the trial grew because of performances by defense lawyer Clarence Darrow and oratory by prosecutor and former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. In the end, the court found Scopes guilty and the state later upheld the constitutionality of the Butler Act. More significantly, the trial exemplified the degree to which southerners were willing to defend the fundamentals of their faith.¹⁶

The Scopes Trial revealed the stark differences between traditionalists and modernists. Many southerners viewed the trial as a critical protection of religious morals in schools and a way to protect against similar threats. William Jennings Bryan called Scopes a "scientific [S]oviet," implying the perceived connection between evolution, atheism, and communism.¹⁷ Bryan and others believed that it was in the best interests of all southerners to not only defend their traditionally conservative views against radicals who promoted evolution, but also to ensure that their children would not be exposed to the atheistic and immoral doctrine of evolution that questioned the authority of Scripture and the dominance of man over God's creation. However, some southern intellectuals feared that the Scopes Trial gave outsiders an unfair impression of the South as a backward and culturally isolated region. As agrarian writer Donald Davidson wrote about the trial in



The 1925 Scopes Trial featured former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan arguing to uphold the Butler Act, which made it illegal for the teaching of evolution in Tennessee's public schools. University of Tennessee Special Collections.

¹⁶ Charles A. Israel, *Before Scopes: Evangelicalism, Education, and Evolution in Tennessee, 1870-1925* (Athens, GA: 2004), 3.

¹⁷ Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken* (New York, 2002), 215.



1958, "It was . . . horrifying . . . to realize that the South was being exposed to large-scale public detraction and did not know or much care how to answer."¹⁸

By the 1920s, traditionalists recognized communism as a significant threat to southern traditions and religion. Communism, which spread across Europe during the 1920s, included decidedly atheistic doctrines that sought to destroy the church as an institution and replace it with secularism. Southern religious groups used the "atheism of Communism . . . to offend and frighten" southerners into more intense religiosity.¹⁹ Fundamentalists and Progressives alike sought to maintain conservative ideals in the South in order to protect against the perceived synonymous threats of atheism and communism. These movements even extended to the educational sector, where "a new emphasis on religious values developed in tax-supported institutions" and academic courses on religion appeared in college and university catalogs.²⁰

Conservatism in Southern Higher Education

In the United States, education and religion have held close ties. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the vast majority of American colleges were founded by particular denominations that propagated their beliefs within their institutions. The largest shift away from religious based higher education came with the new emphasis on the land-grant university system. The 1862 Morrill Act created a system of federally funded land-grant universities in each state to provide students with agricultural, mechanical, and military training. Further, the effects of scientific thought, a reliance on technology, and the culture of modernism undercut the classic liberal arts curriculum, which included courses in religious studies. By the turn of the twentieth century many colleges and universities had drifted away from their religious roots.²¹

Southerners, however, did not view religion as a force opposed to social or economic advancement. On the contrary, many southern reformers believed that the only way for the South to renew its reputation after the Civil War and to intellectually compete with the North was through Christianized education. An 1879 editorial in the *Memphis Baptist* explained that "If the foundations are laid in the general education and Christianization of the people . . . we may expect the future to produce a civilization unsurpassed in other lands."²²

¹⁸ Louis D. Rubin Jr., et al., eds., *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 430.

¹⁹ Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 325.

²⁰ Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 344.

²¹ Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 327; Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education* (New York, 2012), 16-21; Roger L. Geiger and Nathan M. Sorber, eds., *Land Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2013), x-xi, 217-18.

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Southern colleges and universities during the early twentieth century still maintained some level of religious education in their curricula. Generally, the student body of southern schools was white and Protestant. Many colleges and universities required mandatory chapel attendance of their students. Following World War I, many southern colleges increased their focus on providing students with moral and religious education. Partly as a reaction to cultural changes and partly a Progressive Era effort to instill American values, southern educators wanted to point their students along the "path of righteousness." By acting *in loco parentis*, universities sought to nurture "the physical, social, and moral aspects of a student's life as well as the intellectual side." To strengthen their dedication to providing students with Protestant morality, leaders of many southern colleges and universities created departments of religion and formed partnerships with local religious foundations.²³

College students in the 1920s were decidedly different than previous generations: much more autonomous, socially aware, and intellectually curious. In *This Side of Paradise* (1927), novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald described a new student culture that frightened parents and university administrators. Fitzgerald called the new generation of college students the "flaming youth," a reference to their increasingly wild lifestyles that directly challenged the traditional values of their parents. Social trends of the decade, such as drinking illegal liquor, gambling, smoking, erotic literature, increased sexual activity, and changes in women's dress, became part of the new youth culture.²⁴

The appearance of radical politics and ideologies on some college campuses was another component of 1920s youth culture. In a 1920 bulletin issued by the National Association for Constitutional Government, Henry Campbell Black's article "Socialism in American Colleges" discussed the growing prevalence of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society on college campuses nationwide. Black argued that students were particularly vulnerable to socialist ideology because of their "lack of experience and immaturity of judgment." Perhaps just as alarming to parents of college age children, Black wrote that college administrators strongly denied assertions of such organizations on their campuses. Administrators either refused to believe that their students would support such "radical" organizations or tried to cover up any tracks of these organizations on their campuses. Black's article indicated that such clandestine organizations existed and operated underneath the façade of white Protestant schools that promoted traditional values.²⁵

²³ John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore, 2004), 148; Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 330, 344.

²⁴ Thelin, *History of Higher Education*, 211; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York, 1920).

²⁵ Henry Campbell Black, "Socialism in American Colleges," *Bulletin of the National Association for Constitutional Government*, 1 (December 1920): 11-12, 27.

Commonly, southerners lumped all radical, dangerous, or unknown ideologies and groups into the same category. For most, secularism and the teaching of evolution were just as evil as communism, socialism, or atheism. University leaders approached these dangers somewhat equally and intended to eradicate such menaces in order to protect southern traditions and the impressionable Christian youth under their care. In response to the growing concerns about the influences of secularism and the "flaming youth" culture on their students, many southern universities installed two types of deans: academic deans in charge of particular colleges; and deans of students who concerned themselves with the activities of students outside of the classroom. Deans of students on many southern campuses enforced curfews, especially for their female students; kept an eye on various student organizations and clubs; censored student publications; and, most notably in the 1920s, installed religious requirements for their students such as weekly Bible studies or mandatory chapel attendance.²⁶ Responses to youth culture of the 1920s varied, but many southern colleges and universities tightened their oversight of the students under their care.

Leadership at the University of Tennessee in the 1920s

Since its founding in 1794 under the name of Blount College, the University of Tennessee developed as a southern school with connections to providing their students religious education. Its designation as the state's land-grant university after the Civil War changed the mission and purpose of the school. Like other large southern schools, the University of Tennessee attracted white students mostly from the state's rural areas. In the 1920s, president Harcourt Morgan and dean of students James Hoskins focused the school on more conservative and Christian principles, which were also prevalent at other southern universities. Morgan's direction was heavily influenced by Governor Austin Peay's Progressive politics, and the president consistently bowed to the pressures of the state rather than to the wishes of its faculty and students.²⁷

Harcourt A. Morgan became president of the University of Tennessee in 1919. The native-born Canadian had a background in agriculture and over time developed an environmental approach to farming called the "Common Mooring." After serving as a professor of entomology at Louisiana State University he came to Knoxville to lead the fledgling agricultural experiment station in 1905. Morgan became dean of the College of Agriculture in

²⁶ Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, 334; James Riley Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee Seifert Greene, *To Foster Knowledge: A History of the University of Tennessee, 1794-1970* (Knoxville, 1984), 376.

²⁷ McDonald and Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee*, 58.



radical, dangerous, or unknown category. For most, secularism and nihilism as communism, socialism, or other dangers somewhat equally and in order to protect southern traditions under their care. In response to the rise of secularism and the "flaming" of southern universities installed two deans of particular colleges; and deans of the activities of students outside campus. Any southern campuses enforced discipline; kept an eye on various student activities; and, most notably in the 1920s, for their students such as weekly publications; and, most notably in the 1920s, for their students such as weekly publications. Responses to youth culture in colleges and universities tightened discipline.

University of Tennessee 1920s

The name of Blount College, the southern school with connections to the state. Its designation as the state's largest changed the mission and purpose of the school, the University of Tennessee to serve the state's rural areas. In the 1920s, students James Hoskins focused on Christian principles, which were also in Morgan's direction was heavily influenced by progressive politics, and the president was more concerned with the state rather than to the wishes of

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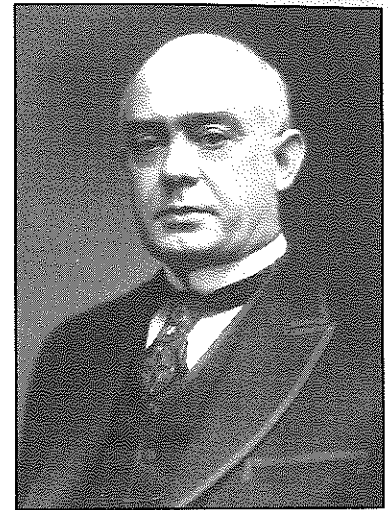
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1913. He was known for his propensity to wear overalls and was popular with farmers; the latter trait would ultimately help create his legacy as university president. Following the death of Brown Ayres in 1919, Harcourt Morgan became president of the University of Tennessee.²⁸

Morgan's first move as president was to increase funding for the university, and he appealed to Governor Peay. The governor's Progressive policies made him an obvious ally for Morgan, who desired to expand the university across the state and to fund new programs and campuses with more state funds. Morgan also wanted to improve the reputation of the university by making stronger connections with the rural citizens who made up a significant portion of Tennessee's population.

Governor Peay ultimately provided the financial assistance that Morgan longed for in his early years as president. In 1925, after personally leading Peay on a tour of the university's campus, Morgan wooed the governor to the university's cause because of Peay's interest in the financial issues of the state. Morgan secured Peay's financial support for the remainder of his term as governor. Peay then struck a deal with the university's Board of Trustees—if the Board would lend its support to his proposed tobacco tax, Peay would secure appropriations for the university's new building program. Despite some reservations on the part of university officials, the board agreed, and Peay secured for the University of Tennessee \$1,026,700 for its building program. The funding allowed the university to build new buildings in Knoxville and also establish campuses and offices across the state.²⁹

University leaders and the Board of Trustees expected Morgan to "interact with the external political and industrial world" in addition to managing the university.³⁰ When Morgan began as president, the challenge was to increase state support for the university, and he quickly fulfilled that goal. But Morgan had no illusions about the reasons for his success. He

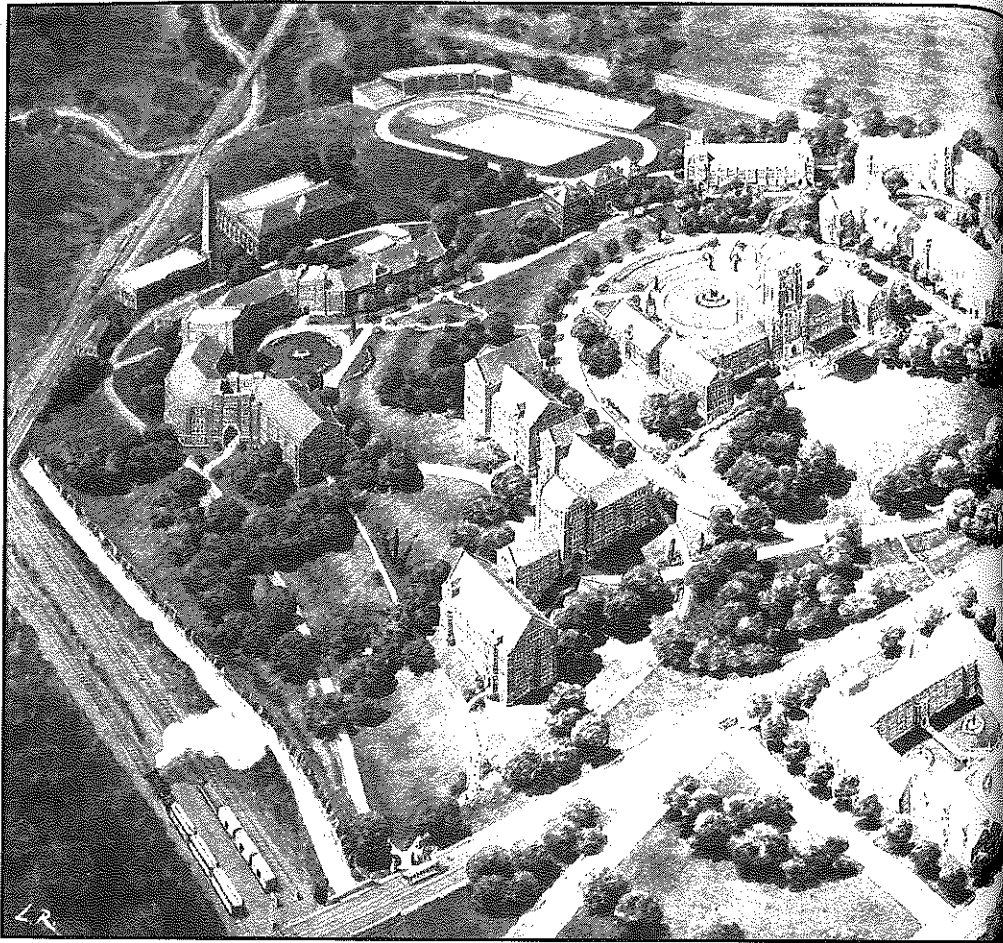


Three-term Tennessee Governor Austin Peay provided support for the University of Tennessee, including state funding for a massive building program on the Knoxville campus. University of Tennessee Special Collections.

²⁸ McDonald and Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee*, 172; Mouzon Peters, "The Story of Dr. Harcourt A. Morgan," in *Makers of Millions: Not for Themselves-But For You*, ed. Louis D. Wallace (Nashville, 1951), 4, 8, 11, 19; Ellis F. Hartford, *Our Common Mooring* (Athens, GA, 1941).

²⁹ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 177.

³⁰ Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 127.



knew that his ability to relate to the rural population of Tennessee had proved invaluable in securing Peay's financial support. Morgan's role as president was indelibly tied to his role as a supporter of the "everyman" of Tennessee, an attitude which began during his tenure as dean of the College of Agriculture. Securing Peay's support sealed Morgan's allegiance to the legislature, the governor's office, and to the people of Tennessee, especially its socially conservative rural population. This loyalty to the wishes of the state often made it difficult for Morgan to manage the operations of the Knoxville campus, but initially it seemed entirely beneficial to the financial security and to the future of the school.³¹

President Morgan's right-hand man at the University of Tennessee was dean of students James D. Hoskins. Despite their professional rivalry, due to Hoskins' desire to be president himself, Morgan and Hoskins achieved a balance of power within the university's administration that allowed Morgan

³¹ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 172, 180.

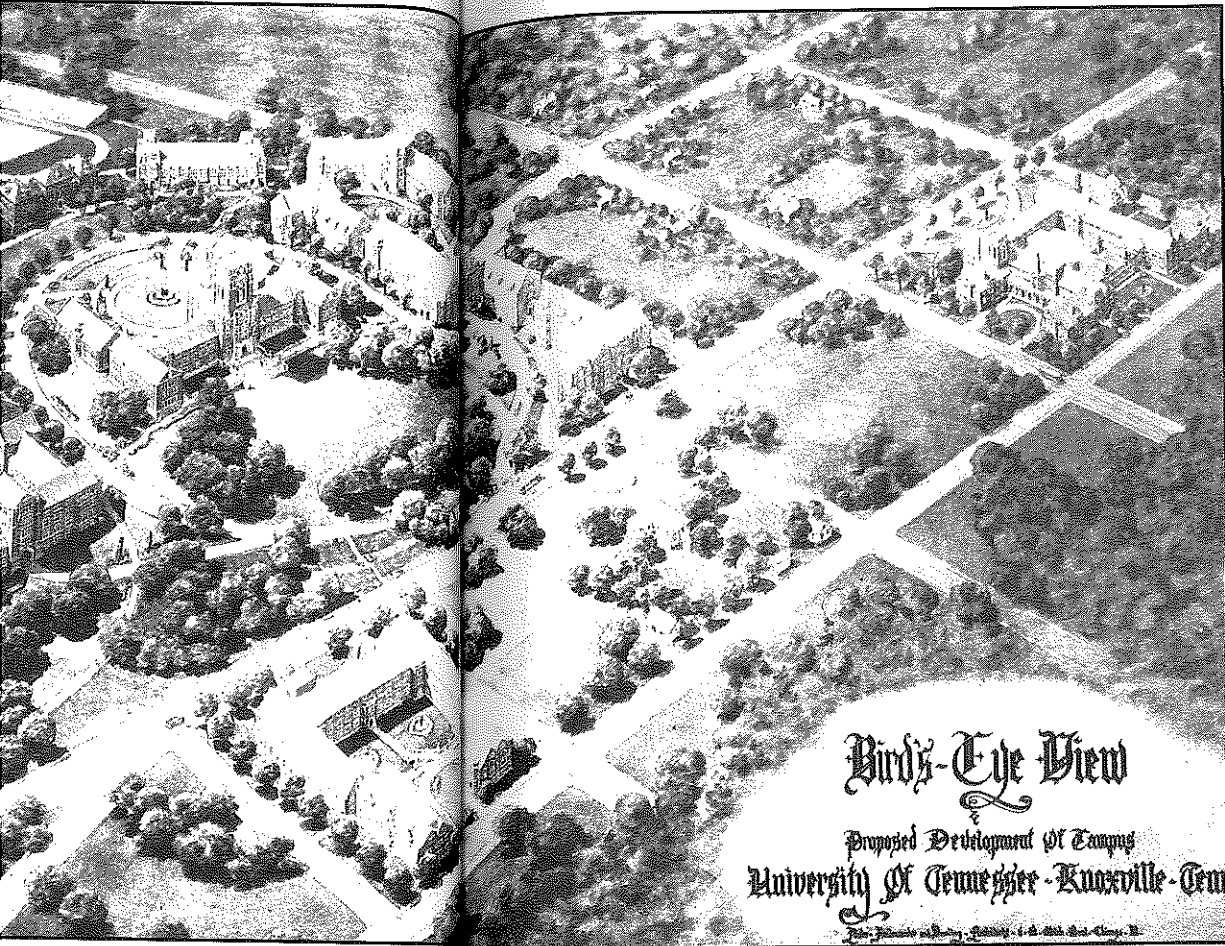
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With financial assistance from Austin Peay and the state legislature, Harcourt Morgan expanded the University of Tennessee's campus in the 1920s. "Birds-Eye View of Campus, 1925," University of Tennessee Special Collections.

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to promote the school throughout the state and left Hoskins to deal with local university issues.³² Commonly seen as "indifferent administrators," Morgan and Hoskins were not known for their relationships with the students or the faculty—in fact, they were regularly seen as so distant from the inner workings of the school that many students and professors believed that there was no "code of behavior" to which they could adhere in order to avoid the wrath of the administration.³³ Hoskins in particular fell under the criticism of the student body. In *The University of Tennessee Magazine* in 1920, student Mary Horner described dean Hoskins as a "stern disciplinarian."³⁴

³² Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 185; Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 184-85.

³³ Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 185.

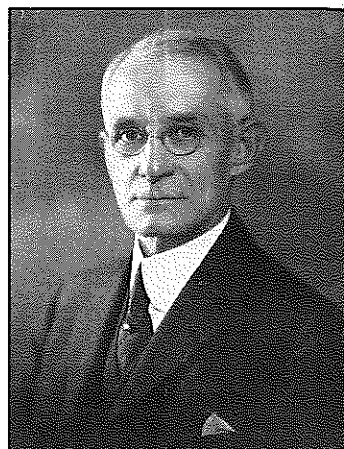
³⁴ Mary Horner, "The University Faculties," *The University of Tennessee Magazine*, 50 (1920): 367-69.



Alumnus Joseph Wood Krutch, who would later criticize the University of Tennessee's administration in an article written for *The Nation*, described a personal run-in with Hoskins in his autobiography. Hoskins had threatened to expel Krutch in 1915 for an article that Krutch wrote for the school's literary magazine condemning Prohibition and the state's legislature.³⁵ However, despite the criticism that Hoskins received, especially from his students, it was Morgan who would ultimately suffer the harshest, and the most public, judgment over the polarizing issue of the "atheistic" theory of evolution.

Three years before the 1925 Butler Act made it illegal to teach evolution in Tennessee's schools, Harcourt Morgan faced a university controversy that centered on evolution. In 1922, J.W. Sprowls, a professor of secondary education, ordered a book for his classes that discussed evolutionary theory. Morgan and Hoskins launched an investigation into the matter and interviewed other faculty members who defended Sprowls. In the end, Hoskins fired Sprowls and four other professors who came to Sprowls' defense, a move supported by many members of the Board of Trustees. Although Morgan himself quietly taught evolutionary theory to his biology classes, he explained that the firings had "absolutely nothing to do" with Sprowls' decision to teach evolutionary theory. However, many charged that Morgan, who anticipated the passage of an anti-evolution law, had allowed the firings in order to dispel rumors that the University of Tennessee advocated the teaching of evolution.³⁶

Responses to the faculty firings controversy varied. University students and faculty defended Sprowls and the other faculty members, many of whom believed that they had been fired because they disagreed with Morgan and Hoskins about issues unrelated to evolution. The American Association of University Professors published a significant amount of criticism against Morgan's and Hoskins' decision.³⁷ Morgan received a number of letters from Tennessee citizens both in support of and in opposition to the administration's decision. A concerned father wrote to Morgan, "I am casting around for a good school for [my son] to enter . . . but I desire to



As dean of students in the 1920s, James D. Hoskins enforced traditional values and worked with other university officials to regulate the social activities of male and female students. University of Tennessee Special Collections.

³⁵ Joseph Wood Krutch, *More Lives Than One* (New York, 1962), 55-56.

³⁶ H.A. Morgan to Woolief Thomas, June 12, 1923, Box 7, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special Collections; Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 186; Marinucci, "God, Darwin, and Loyalty," 1.

³⁷ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 187.



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³⁸ A.N. Trice to Collections.

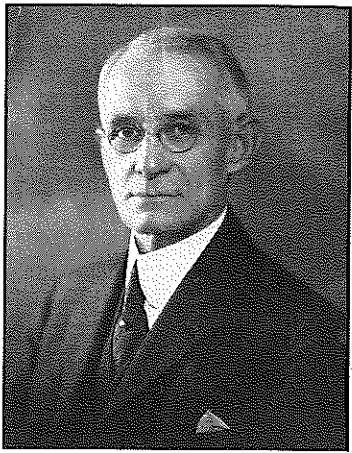
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As dean of students in the 1920s, James D. Hoskins enforced traditional values and worked with other university officials to regulate the social activities of male and female students. University of Tennessee Special Collections.

avoid this so-called 'new science' that advocates Darwinism, rationalism, and destructive higher criticism."³⁸

In discussing the faculty firings, the theme of protecting students and the state from harmful theories appeared frequently. Concerned parents, local businessmen, and rural farmers, who believed that Morgan was acting to protect taxpayers' children from exposure to atheistic theories such as evolution, generally agreed with the faculty firings. One newspaper remarked that Morgan likely supported the firings because he was "devoted to the state."³⁹ Another commented,

*The taxpayers of the state, the ordinary, average every day Americans who support the university, are with President Morgan in this controversy. The taxpayers know that the usefulness of the university will be utterly destroyed unless there is discipline, that 'student government' will soon lead to anarchy and so utterly discredit the institution that Christian homes would soon refuse to send their sons and daughters to the college.*⁴⁰

Many Christian churches in the state vocally supported Morgan's actions, which they believed upheld Christian morality in schools. A meeting of the Methodist, Baptist, A.R. Presbyterian, and Federated Presbyterian Churches of Fayetteville, Tennessee resulted in a public commendation of Morgan's firing of Sprowls. The group applauded Morgan's "moral courage to combat evil in high places" and, in decidedly postwar language, thanked Morgan for ensuring that "this state institution does not follow in the footsteps of German infidels in teaching that man sprung from a lower order of beings."⁴¹

Morgan also received letters from Tennesseans bemoaning Sprowls' firing and the way that the university handled the controversy. One writer noted his "mingled feelings of surprise and disgust" upon learning of the firings and "considered the step which you have taken as a distinct step backwards."⁴² Another writer explained, "As a citizen and tax payer of this state, I feel a certain ownership in our state school and believe that all fundamental truths should be taught regardless of what religious sect they may affect."⁴³

³⁸ A.N. Trice to H.A. Morgan, January 17, 1924, Box 7, Folder 5, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

³⁹ "Why Morgan Is Upheld," *The News Scimitar*, n.d., in Box 6, Folder 18, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁴⁰ "Morgan Sustained," *The Herald*, n.d., in Box 6, Folder 18, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁴¹ "Whereas, it has been publically reported . . .," Box 7, Folder 3, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁴² Frank M. Dryzer to H.A. Morgan, July 5, 1923, Box 6, Folder 17, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁴³ [unidentified author, on Nashville Bridge Company stationery] to H.A. Morgan, April 11, 1923, Box 7, Folder 5, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

Morgan's support of the firings was based on what he perceived the taxpayers wanted. However, it was also clear that Morgan was not necessarily opposed to teaching of evolution. Morgan had taught evolution in his classes in the agriculture department, but he was careful to note that the theory he taught had no religious undertones. In a March 1925 letter to Governor Peay, who had supported the firings and later supported the Butler Act, Morgan wrote to ask that the term "evolution" in the Butler Act only include "man's ascent from a monkey" and not "the plan of civilized man by breeding and selection to improve . . . plants and animals."⁴⁴ Morgan likely believed that his careful wording would allow for certain scientific components of evolution to be taught at the university without creating an uproar from conservative groups. The faculty firings also brought to light the issue of academic freedom in higher education. However, Morgan's fear of upsetting the legislature and the taxpayers overrode the needs of the university faculty to teach modern intellectual concepts.

The passage of the 1925 Butler Act triggered other reactions to the growing debate over teaching evolution in Tennessee's schools. Once again, Morgan defended his university and stance on the issue. In 1925, Edwin Mims, a professor of English at Vanderbilt University, wrote a petition opposing the Butler Act that then sent it to other prominent Tennessee schools for signatures of support from respected faculty members. When Mims pointedly asked Morgan to sign the petition, he declined saying, "the subject of Evolution so intricately involves religious beliefs, concerning which the University has no disposition to dictate, that the University declines to engage in the controversy."⁴⁵ Morgan feared that aligning with those opposed to the Butler Act would hurt the University of Tennessee's reputation irreparably, especially because the legislature had approved over a million dollars of taxpayers' money for capital construction projects. Furthermore, throughout the Scopes Trial, Morgan made few if any comments to the press about his opinions on the potential outcome.⁴⁶

Many criticized Morgan's silence on the Butler Bill, the Scopes Trial, and evolution. Joseph Wood Krutch, a student disciplined by Hoskins for writing a piece about Prohibition, wrote a scathing article for *The Nation* about Morgan's failure to take a stand on the evolution controversy. The article, entitled "Tennessee: Where Cowards Rule," described the atmosphere of fear surrounding the Scopes Trial, especially Morgan's failure to speak up on the issue. Krutch wrote:

⁴⁴ H.A. Morgan to Austin Peay, March 18, 1925, Box 1, Folder 12, Harcourt Alexander Morgan Papers, MS-522, UT Special Collections.

⁴⁵ Israel, *Before Scopes*, 146.

⁴⁶ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 189.



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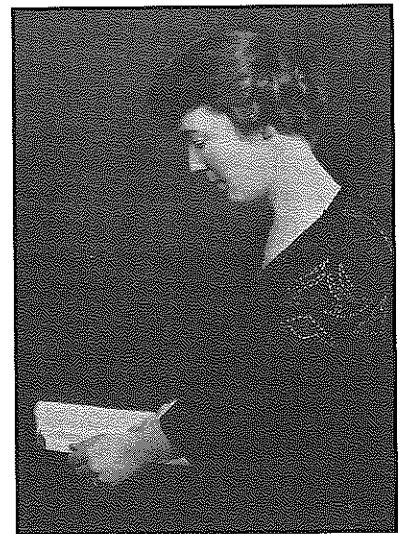
... ter Knowledge, 189.

While the president of the State University sat in his office praying that he might be allowed to violate the law in peace . . . and while he was, at the same time, seeking to retain the friendship of both sides and accepting the congratulations of various fundamentalist bodies for his stand against evolution, Dayton was arranging to settle . . . what the representatives of science, education, and enlightenment were anxious only to dodge.

Krutch condemned the president of his alma mater for his hypocrisy and pointed out that Morgan was willing to sacrifice his personal beliefs in order to not compromise any potential for "political advantage or material gain." Furthermore, Krutch criticized Morgan for failing to show "some sign of zeal for truth and that intellectual honesty which it is, presumably, the function of education to inculcate."⁴⁷

Notably, many of the faculty members at the University of Tennessee followed Morgan's lead and did not vocalize their opinions about the Butler Act. Their reticence to speak typified the general attitude of circumspection and caution, especially in light of the faculty firings from just a few years prior.⁴⁸ As Krutch wrote, "the president is afraid of the legislature; [and] the faculty is afraid of the president." Despite the criticism of many who perceived the school's silence as one of "reprehensible timidity," Morgan stood firmly by his commitment that the university served the entire state. And as such, Morgan believed that if the state largely supported the Butler Act and the elimination of evolution and atheism in the classroom, then the university should follow suit.⁴⁹ However, his focus on state support and pleasing the taxpayers resulted in an erosion of trust between the administration and the faculty at the university.

Harcourt Morgan, James Hoskins, and other administrators viewed the students at the University of Tennessee as under their care. They believed that the students needed some level of security, nurturing, and



Harriet Greve, the dean of women at the University of Tennessee in the 1920s, focused on maintaining separate spheres and facilities for male and female students. The Volunteer, 1927 (Knoxville, 1927), 12.

⁴⁷ Joseph Wood Krutch, "Tennessee: Where Cowards Rule," *The Nation*, 121 (15 July 1925): 88-89.

⁴⁸ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 189.

⁴⁹ Krutch, "Tennessee: Where Cowards Rule," 89.

guidance in order to avoid being swept into the immoral lifestyle of the "flaming youth." Student housing was one area where colleges and university administrators wanted to create order and division. Coeducational colleges and universities were a particular concern for the parents of students. Young girls and boys living in close quarters were perceived as threatening the sanctity of marriage, in that it provided both a temptation and an opportunity to engage in premarital sexual activity. In response, the dean of women at the University of Tennessee, Harriet Greve, emphasized a "fine differentiation between the spheres of activity of men and women" both in the classroom and in the dormitories.⁵⁰

The concept of the "flapper girl" of the 1920s promoted sexualized clothing styles, smoking, and drinking for women. To many southerners, including the administration of the University of Tennessee, this attitude and behavior was inherently immoral. In 1924, Greve explained that it was "wrong" and "demoralizing" for women to smoke. Greve and others monitored campus activities (particularly dances), established dress codes, and enforced curfew for women. However, the increasing availability of automobiles facilitated off-campus activities for both men and women, and transported them away from the watchful eyes of deans and campus supervisors.⁵¹

In addition to protecting student bodies from harm, university administrators also wanted to protect their minds from dangerous political ideas. University officials combated secular groups by promoting Protestant religious activities. In addition to making attendance at chapel programs and church on Sunday mandatory, the university put more emphasis on student branches of the YMCA and the YWCA.⁵²

Just as the university's administration placed more limitations on student life, students of the 1920s demanded more freedom, choices, and a voice on campus. Students openly criticized Morgan and Hoskins. In the aftermath of Sprowls' firing, some members of the student body circulated a publication called *The Truth* that objected to the decision. The publication also called for the creation of student government, an honor system, and autonomy over student publications.⁵³ In 1925, a group of students responded to the passage of the Butler Act. They wrote a petition addressed to "our dear legislators" that facetiously thanked them for their "faithful service to the public" and requested that the legislature amend the law of gravity and that they address the "excessive speed of light."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "What the World Expects of Women," Box 1, Folder 3, Dean of Women Collection, AR-345, UT Special Collections.

⁵¹ Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 368, 381.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 376-77.

⁵³ Stephen D. Chandler, "Cleaning House: The U.T. Faculty Firings of 1923" (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1998), 45-46.

⁵⁴ Norton, *Religion in Tennessee*, 103.

Rumors a

Homer Croy's student-led atheist organization was as a shock to many. The article focused on an Advancement of Atheists records, Croy alleged Atheists clubs. The University of southern schools list of Kentucky.⁵⁵

Croy's article and Freeman Hopwood organization's spreading of atheism founding in November had established clubs schools and three movement.⁵⁶ Hopwood for the article:

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⁵⁵ Croy, "Atheism Beckon

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.



Rumors and Threats of an Atheists Club

Homer Croy's 1927 article in *The World's Work* about the existence of student-led atheist organizations at many large, well-known universities came as a shock to many readers, especially those with college-age children. The article focused on an organization called the American Association of the Advancement of Atheism (AAAA). During his research into the AAAA's records, Croy allegedly found a list of eighteen institutions that housed Atheists clubs. The list included schools such as the University of Colorado, the University of Chicago, and the University of California. The only southern schools listed were the University of Tennessee and the University of Kentucky.⁵⁵

Croy's article discussed the AAAA and its founders, Charles Lee Smith and Freeman Hopwood, and, "without bias or opinion," described the organization's purpose and future plans, many of which focused on the spreading of atheism to young people in America. Between the time of its founding in November of 1925 and Croy's article two years later, the AAAA had established clubs in a total of twenty American colleges and preparatory schools and three high schools, and had also founded a junior atheist movement.⁵⁶ Hopwood, the organization's secretary, stated in an interview for the article:

The beauty of it is that we have so many atheists in the college faculties of America. But of course they can't say much about it, as they would be thrown out, and then where would their living come from? But they encourage the students all they can. As the movement grows the professors will become more and more open in their private beliefs.⁵⁷

For many Tennesseans, including Morgan, Hoskins, and Greve, the accusation that an Atheists Club existed at the University of Tennessee was preposterous. Throughout the decade, university administrators had put in place programs and restrictions designed to focus students on traditional, Protestant, and academic values. The inextricable connection between atheism and evolution meant that Morgan's main constituents, the legislature and Tennessee taxpayers would be strongly opposed to such a student organization at the state's land-grant institution. Thus, and as the faculty firings earlier in the decade indicated, the university's administration would move swiftly to expel students involved in radical organizations in order to protect other students, the school's reputation, and alliances in Nashville. If anything, university leadership depended on their strong

⁵⁵ Croy, "Atheism Beckons to Our Youth," 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.



In the 1920s, Freeman Hopwood co-founded the American Association of the Advancement of Atheism. As secretary of the organization he organized pro-Atheist groups on college and university campuses. Homer Croy, "Atheism Beckons to Our Youth," The World's Work, 54 (May 1927): 21.

record to weed out subversive thought as a deterrent to potentially radical students and faculty.

Hopwood's comments about the structure of the AAAA made the existence of such a group in Knoxville unlikely. He explained that the AAAA counted on increased support from the upper echelons of collegiate institutions to propagate their atheistic ideals. However, the administration at the University of Tennessee during the 1920s was dedicated to promoting traditional values, rejecting modernist or radical ideas, and censuring or firing faculty who support subversive movements within the school. Contrary to Hopwood's beliefs, the students at the University of Tennessee would not have received the support of their faculty members for such a group, because even those who taught secular doctrines like evolution were either fired, like Sprowls, or they kept their views quiet, like Morgan himself. The firing of faculty

and the unified faculty silence on their opinions about the Scopes Trial earlier in the decade indicated that the University of Tennessee was not an institution that would support an atheistic student group.

On the surface, there was little if any evidence that an Atheists Club existed at the University of Tennessee. However, that did not stop concerned taxpayers and parents of students to express their opinions to Morgan. The letters to the university from people across the state supported Morgan's belief that he had an obligation to defend the reputation of his institution. James N. Cox, a businessman from Cookeville, Tennessee, wrote that because of Morgan's strong leadership and high moral values, he could not believe that the University of Tennessee appeared in Croy's article. However, the possibility that an Atheists Club existed was just too much for Cox and others to get past. In a later letter, Cox explained that he would rather see his sons enter the business world with only high school degrees than have them attend the University of Tennessee and run "the risk of contamination and disbelief" that would inevitably result if the university did indeed house an Atheists Club.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ James N. Cox to Felix M. Massey, April 30, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special Collections.



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J.B. Summers, a businessman from Somerville, Tennessee, noted in his
 June 16, 1927 letter to Morgan that he had voted for a tax bill that "made
 a definite support for the institution" and that he "always insisted upon
 the representatives of this county being friends of the school." Summers
 concluded, "I appeal to you as a Christian leader in education to stamp
 out this awful cancer that is eating at the vitals of the head of our school
 system."⁵⁹ Summers, like Morgan, believed that lending financial and voter
 support for the university meant that the university in turn had an obligation
 to fulfill the religious and moral expectations of the people who supported it.

The reactions of university administrators went beyond merely denying
 the existence of an Atheists Club. In defense of their institution, they
 emphasized the excellence in Christian education provided by the university.
 Morgan wrote to concerned businessman L.F. Pratt that the "University of
 Tennessee has never had a student body more positively Christian than
 the present one" and that the "ministers of [Knoxville] tell me that the
 University's atmosphere is the best that they have seen including their
 own church schools."⁶⁰ Morgan directly confronted and denied the charge
 of an Atheists Club and he emphasized that the University of Tennessee
 supported Christian values, without being clearly affiliated with a religious
 denomination. Just as he had handled the issue of the faculty firings, Morgan
 defended the conservatism and religiosity of the University of Tennessee in
 an effort to appease the taxpayers and citizens of the state instead of granting
 the student body certain personal freedoms.

By the beginning of classes in fall 1927, the administration of the
 University of Tennessee had largely dispelled the charge from Croy's article
 about an Atheists Club. However, the question of whether or not such a
 subversive group ever existed remains. The responses from the university's
 administration provide evidence to approach this question. The corpus
 of letters sent and received by the administration during 1927 indicated
 that rumors of such a secret radical group had circulated around campus.
 Had the rumor remained within the confines of campus, it is likely that the
 entire controversy would not have happened. However, publication of that
 information in a national publication alerted many outside of the university
 to more than a rumor, but a tangible threat that required a response by
 the administration. The threat of an Atheists Club, rather than any actual
 activities, challenged the university's traditional rules and empowered
 students trying to gain a voice with a rigid administration.

Correspondence from dean of men Felix Massey and president Morgan
 hinted at possible origins of such a rumor. More importantly, their letters
 provided stronger evidence that administrators were aware of actual attempts

⁵⁹ J.B. Summers to H. A. Morgan, June 16, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special
 Collections.

⁶⁰ H.A. Morgan to L.F. Pratt, May 21, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

by students to organize an Atheists Club on campus and to affiliate with the AAAA. In an April 28, 1927 letter, Massey explained to Cookeville businessmen James N. Cox that "one or two radical students tried to organize such a club" in 1926 and might have even given an interview to a newspaper. However, Massey explained that those students ultimately rescinded their statement and denied the existence of any such a club. The letter provided no other details on which students or newspapers might have been involved, but it gave a clear account of a known attempt to form a campus Atheists Club.⁶¹ A letter from Morgan to Somerville businessman J.B. Summers, written about six weeks later, offered another source of the rumor. Morgan explained that the only evidence of the "University thinking on such lines" was a student's correspondence some years earlier with "some New York atheist society," most likely the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism.⁶² The letter confirmed that at least one radical student at the University of Tennessee wanted to gain external support for an Atheists Club. It is unclear if Massey and Morgan were describing the same or separate events, but together their correspondence indicated that there were at least a handful of students at the University of Tennessee with an interest in forming an Atheists Club.

There is no existing evidence that the radical students mentioned by Massey or Morgan successfully formed an Atheists Club at the University of Tennessee in the mid-1920s. The chances for exposure, expulsion, or severe penalties were too high for most students. If such a group did form, it would have been a clandestine organization unsupported by faculty and far from the watchful eyes of the university's administration. No matter what the original intentions of these radical students might have been in exploring the possibilities of starting an Atheists Club on campus, they triggered a number of alarms at the university which by the late 1920s faced numerous cultural, social, and political pressures.

Conclusion

The 1920s were a decade of ideological change and conflict across the nation. A decided shift in cultural values occurred after World War I. The alleged "flaming youth" took more liberal approaches to behavior, politics, and religion. Intellectuals, scientists, and writers abandoned more fundamental beliefs in favor of new values and discoveries. Traditionalists rejected modernist values and emphasized a fundamentalist ideology. During the decade, church membership grew and new fundamentalist congregations formed. At the same time, administrators at colleges and universities tightened their grip on the students and social activities on their campuses.

⁶¹ Massey to Cox, April 28, 1927, Box 3, Folder 2, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

⁶² Morgan to Summers, June 18, 1927, Box 3, Folder 1, AR-1, UT Special Collections.



b on campus and to affiliate with
, Massey explained to Cookeville
two radical students tried to organize
given an interview to a newspaper.
students ultimately rescinded their
y such a club. The letter provided
spapers might have been involved,
attempt to form a campus Atheists
ville businessman J.B. Summers,
ther source of the rumor. Morgan
University thinking on such lines”
ears earlier with “some New York
Association for the Advancement
at least one radical student at the
external support for an Atheists
gan were describing the same or
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Atheists Club at the University of
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R-1, UT Special Collections.

1, AR-1, UT Special Collections.

The cultural battles of the 1920s were particularly noteworthy in the South. In 1925, the small town of Dayton, Tennessee became the stage for a national debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools. The outcomes of the Scopes Trial further divided modernists and traditionalists and cast Tennessee as a somewhat backward state disinterested in catching up with the rest of the nation. The Butler Act, which made it illegal to teach evolution in Tennessee’s public schools, remained in effect until the legislature repealed the law in 1967.

In Knoxville, just eighty miles from Dayton, reactions to modernism and the evolution debates surfaced at the University of Tennessee at several points in the 1920s. The firing of pro-evolution faculty, unified silence on the Butler Bill and the Scopes Trail, and denial of the existence of an Atheists Club on campus indicated that the university’s administration took a hard line against modernist or radical thought. This last incident, in particular, revealed the tensions between the younger generations, seeking to break free from the conservatism and religiosity of their parents, and the older generations, trying to protect their children from the very ideas that would promote liberalism and secularism.

President Harcourt Morgan, who wanted to maintain positive relationships with rural Tennesseans and the state legislature, portrayed the University of Tennessee as an institution that espoused political conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and a general atmosphere of traditionalism—in essence, a place where Tennessee parents could feel safe sending their children. Morgan and other leaders in southern higher education wanted to protect the next generation from the encroaching cultural changes and challenges in society. At the same time, however, their efforts revealed that southern colleges and universities of the 1920s were hardly the bastions of traditionalism that they purported to be.

