

Scopes, Galileo and the Dramatization of Conflict

In *Summer for the Gods*, Edward J. Larson looks at the Scopes trial over antievolution legislation as emblem and perhaps cause of America's continuing debate over science and religion. Pitting state against church, individual liberty against majoritarian opinion, North against South and any number of other oppositions, few other events in our national history have provided such rich possibilities for analysis, both historical and mythical, while simultaneously evoking the centuries old, and clearly still vital, conflict between science and religion.

When Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee wanted to write a play to condemn Senator McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee, they seized upon the Scopes trial as a metaphor for individual liberty winning out against authoritarian dictate. *Inherit the Wind* is thus as much about larger, more abstract issues as the conflict science and religion. Like Arthur Miller with *The Crucible*, in looking to history to illuminate the present, Lawrence and Lee were practicing a dramatic technique most associated with German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht expressly discussed the concept of alienation, in which "a familiar subject is placed in a strange setting, so that one can sit back and be amazed. What kind of strangeness? It is a matter of what strangeness will throw the subject into highest relief..." (Bentley, 14).

In one of his own plays, Brecht went back to the first great conflict between science and religion, another infamous trial, that of Galileo by the Catholic Church. *Galileo* is something of a companion piece to *Inherit the Wind*, as each equates historical religious authority with

contemporary political authority as a potential threat to freedom. For Lawrence and Lee, McCarthyism was an expression of absolute power corrupted absolutely, akin to the Nazism which Brecht railed against directly. The right to teach Darwinism in the face of fundamentalist Christianity and the right to teach heliocentrism in the face of Catholic authoritarianism both stand for truth and liberty in general.¹

In each of these plays, then, history is subordinated to a present-day political agenda. It is understandable, almost inevitable, that at least some facts should be lost in dramatization. Yet when most people form their impressions of the Scopes trial from the Cates trial (Larson, 244-5), a closer look at plays such as these may prove important. Indeed, the authors take so many liberties that they betray their own intentions even as they misrepresent history. A review of each play's treatment of science and religion followed by a look at historical inaccuracies will shed some light.

At their root, both stories' conflict between science and religion comes from a disagreement over the validity of a theory about humanity's place in the universe. Cates teaches Darwinian evolution, in which humanity evolved over great spans of time from "lower" lifeforms, contradicting Biblical creationism, in which humanity was divinely created. Brady and the fundamentalists of Hillsboro defend their stance on two main grounds. First, the Bible must be interpreted literally, and second (less crucially in the play than in reality), the Darwinian theory is insufficiently supported by factual evidence. Were the theory upheld, there would seemingly be no place for God and there would certainly be less justification for man feeling himself special.

Galileo also proposes a theory which removes humanity from a favored position. His

¹It is worth noting that Nazism had much grounding in social Darwinism, creating an additional, if subtle, link between the plays. Each play even has a nod to the science of the other: Drummond invokes physics to explain the lost commonality between himself and Brady (Lawrence & Lee, 60) while Sagredo derides lackey scholars as "court monkeys" (Brecht, 64).

studies have led him to believe that the Earth revolves around the sun, moving it from the center of the universe and therefore, in the eyes of the Church, from the focus of God's attention.

Similar objections apply here as with Cates teaching evolution. Again, the theory is said to have little evidence and, more importantly, to go against the favored interpretation of the Bible. In this case, it is the Church fathers' interpretation that holds rather than a completely literal one, but in the pertinent passages the literal meaning is held true in opposition to Galileo. The place of God is also called into question, with Galileo himself suggesting that God might be "Within ourselves. Or - nowhere" (Brecht, 63). If this were so, life would be made unbearable to those who count on God and who would have to acknowledge that "there is no eye watching over us... There is no meaning in our misery" (Brecht, 84).

Neither story, though, is simply about casting off God. Were this so, the debate would be between religion and atheism. It is science that is suggested in both cases as worth holding onto, as the proper way to understand the world we live in. Drummond alludes to this when he says, "The man who has everything figured out is probably a fool. College examinations notwithstanding, it takes a very smart fella to say 'I don't know the answer!'" (Lawrence & Lee, 49). Scientific method, rather metaphysical doubt, is held above faith as a proper epistemology, one that can lead to greater knowledge in the end. Galileo makes this point more directly, holding observation as the supreme way to learn about the world and to be destined to win over superstition: "Sooner or later everybody must succumb to it" (Brecht, 63). The whole of Scene 4 is devoted to this notion, and his speech on how they will learn about sunspots shows the direct connection between observation and the scientific method which gradually gets one closer to the truth (Brecht, 96). Just as the prophet Teiresias in *Oedipus Rex* has "sight" though he is blind, Galileo sacrifices his own sense of sight, allowing it to grow weaker with every use of the

telescope, so that he may arrive at deeper knowledge (Brecht, 111-2).

The superiority of science over religion is shown in both plays with a subtle and interesting parallel. Brady indulges at his welcoming picnic despite his wife's reminding him of doctor's orders to the contrary (Lawrence & Lee, 21), while the Old Cardinal rails against Galileo, proclaiming the central importance of man in God's eyes, despite a Monk's reminding him of doctor's orders to avoid excitement (Brecht, 73). It is no surprise that the Old Cardinal collapses after his diatribe and that Brady will eventually have a fatal heart attack after his own later on. In each case, religion is symbolically shown to be contrary to what is good for people.

Further light can be shed on the conflict by looking at how some of the key plot points compare to history. Indeed, *Inherit the Wind* received a great deal of criticism about how it altered facts, not only from fundamentalists and other antievolutionists, but even from Joseph Wood Krutch, who had led the liberal media to the trial. Krutch later said, "The events [at Dayton] are more a part of the folklore of liberalism than of history" (Larson, 244). Larson specifically points out three fundamental changes to the story of the Scopes trial. First, the town of Hillsboro is made much more fundamentalist than Dayton, to the point where Hornbeck proclaims it "The buckle on the Bible Belt" (Lawrence & Lee, 13). Daytonites may have, on the whole, sided in favor of the antievolution statue, but their main interest in the trial was the fame it would bring the town. Hillsboro, on the other hand, is made out to be sinister, the site of a witch hunt to rival McCarthy's (Larson, 241). Indeed, in two separate points, the stage directions state that the town itself is on trial (Lawrence & Lee, 3, 33).

The second main change is that Brady is made out to be a "mindless, reactionary creature of the mob" (Larson, 241), in strong contrast to Bryan. Much to the dismay of some on his side of the case, Bryan acknowledged the possible validity of the age-day theory, which Drummond

uses against the Biblical literalist Brady (Lawrence & Lee, 86-87). The Bible now appears to be Brady's sole interest in the case, where Bryan was much more concerned with the larger social implications regarding majoritarianism. For Brady, all science is Godless, while Darwinian evolution for Bryan was simply bad science. The final main change that Larson identifies is an uplifting of Drummond's character with respect to Darrow's original image (Larson, 242). Instead of muscling ACLU lawyers out of the way as Darrow did, Drummond simply comes on after having been engaged by the Baltimore *Herald*, Hornbeck's fictional employer. More significantly, where Darrow claimed that Bryan "died of a busted belly," Hornbeck now takes that line while Drummond defends Brady's religion, having lost Darrow's "crusading materialism" (Larson, 242). Drummond becomes the voice of tolerance, evident from his willingness to allow Darwin and the Bible, i.e., science and religion, to sit side by side in his briefcase at curtain.

In the Cates trial, as in the Scopes trial, the religion side of the debate is made out to be the underdog. But *Inherit the Wind* pushes the underdog away from Bryan's moderation to Brady's extremism. Big city science forces its way into small-town America to put religion on trial (despite it actually being Cates who is on trial), and religion loses. In this scheme, it is religion's status as "the little guy" that makes its authoritarian inclinations fail. Brady must be emblematic of this side of the argument in order for the drama of the play to be heightened.

In *Galileo*, science, in the person of Galileo, is the underdog. He comes from the provinces to his trial in Rome, in effect facing small-town science off against big-city religion. As in *Inherit the Wind*, it is the big-city view that wins out - the difference, of course, is that the dominant view changes over time from religion to science, due in no small part to the findings of Galileo himself. The same sort of modification occurs here, though, as with Brady. The underdog is made more extreme than he actually was. Galileo was, in fact, a religious man who

wrote powerfully about reconciling science with the Bible, most notably in “A Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina.” Brecht, however, makes Galileo out to be nearly an atheist, eager to suggest, as noted before, that God might not exist at all. Again, character is altered to heighten the drama, making the opposition all the more opposing even at the expense of historical truth. The real Galileo would be aligned with the fictional Cates, who suggests that divine creation, rather than being a lie, may simply have been “a *long* miracle” (Lawrence & Lee). Like the modernists of Scopes’ time, Galileo would have espoused interpreting the Bible to be consistent with scientific findings. The fictional Galileo, though, seems just as stubborn as Brady, unwilling to budge from his extreme position, ready to fight until there is a clear winner between science and religion.

In the end, what are the main points of each of the two plays, and how successfully are these points articulated? It seems that both plays are primarily about the right to free thought, as expressly stated by Drummond (Lawrence & Lee, 64) and Galileo’s acquaintance Matti (Brecht, 105). For Lawrence & Lee, intellectual liberty stands for all liberty and the notion of legislating thought is condemned. Brecht drives home the same point. It is not just about what a scholar like Galileo is free to say but about the freedom of fishwives’ sons to go to school (Brecht, 49), the freedom of everyone to “say and do just what he pleases,” (Brecht, 99). Nobody must be “forbidden to think - the name of the Inquisition” (Brecht, 53), and even Galileo maintains his beliefs after he recants: it is impossible to legislate thought.

But since each play abandoned the more moderate nature of its main defendant, i.e., Bryan and Galileo, it seems impossible that liberty could be the main theme. Rather than suggesting simply that scientists must be free to pursue their interests, both plays go further, painting religion as an authoritarian evil and science as the ultimate truth. In this scheme, there is no liberty for the religious and science becomes its own authoritarian menace. A close look at the plays reveals this

deeper message to be present, but in each case it seems to be too little too late.

Drummond, of course, defends Brady to Hornbeck, claiming that he had “the same right as Cates: the right to be wrong!” (Lawrence & Lee, 114), consistent with the upholding of liberty in general over science alone as an ideal. Likewise, Galileo briefly expresses appreciation for the Bible (Brecht, 105) and, in his last big speech, claims that scientific progress can at times come with human drudgery (Brecht, 122-14). Early on, Cates says regarding his predicament, “It isn’t as simple as that. Good or bad, black or white, night or day” (Lawrence & Lee, 8), and both Lawrence & Lee and Brecht appear to want to express this. It seems no coincidence that their bones are thrown toward the end of each play, the authors hoping that this might be what sticks with an audience due to the psychological recency effect, but neither is enough to counter the main leanings of each play.

In his introduction to the play, Eric Bentley tells us that there were two versions of *Galileo*, only the second of which is known to audiences (Bentley, 14). The first (1938), inspired directly by authoritarianism in Germany, was more focused on the idea of liberty, while the second (1947) was inspired by the United States’ use of the atomic bomb against Japan and attempted to dissent against unbridled scientific advance that might easily be co-opted by utilitarian authorities: “*Galileo I* is a ‘liberal’ defense of freedom against tyranny, while *Galileo II* is a Marxist defense of a social conception of science against the ‘liberal’ view that truth is an end in itself” (Bentley, 18-19). Thus, even Brecht himself intended science to be something less than the ultimate truth in the version of the play which is known to us, yet his intentions are marred by his alteration of Galileo’s character. Further, the notion of humanity’s position on which the play is based is discredited by Bentley, with the issue apparently non-existent in Galileo’s own time and thus layered on by Brecht in order to heighten the conflict with the Church (Bentley, 9). That Brecht

should emphasize the difference between Galileo and the Church by making Galileo a near-atheist when he intended messages about liberty and scientific caution seems all the more incongruous.

A Galileo willing, indeed desiring, to sit on the fence between science and religion would have been a character more apt to make the point of either version of *Galileo*. Likewise, to make their statement most fully, Lawrence & Lee would have not only had to push Bryan to Brady's extreme but they would have had to pull back Drummond even farther from Darrow. As things stand, Drummond's heartfelt expressions of tolerance after Brady's death seem as tacked-on and untrue to character as Galileo's warning about science. Thus, *Inherit the Wind* and *Galileo* do well at proclaiming science's superiority over religion but are generally unsuccessful at communicating the points their authors actually intended.

Themes of liberty and scientific caution seem consistent with an attempt to reconcile science and religion, inasmuch as liberty as an ideal implies rights for all and scientific caution suggests the need to understand science as neither evil nor good. These are all themes of gray between black and white. But Lawrence & Lee and Brecht turn up the contrast between black and white by craft their drama to heighten the conflict between science and religion. Not only do the plays betray their intentions in general, but they fuel the fire of science vs. religion, encouraging audiences to think about a crucial specific issue in terms antithetical to their message. Fictionalization may be a common and even necessary part of writing historical theatre, but when authors compromise their message for the sake of mere drama, they do a disservice to their subject, their audience and themselves. In the end, perhaps these authors simply did not pick the kind of strangeness that throws their subject into highest relief.

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