

## PROGRESSIVE VERSUS CYCLICAL APPROACHES IN THE RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL EVENTS (U.S. HISTORY)

The progressive view of history is linear or teleological. Strongly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, Jewish approaches to history, and Christian syntheses of world history, progressives look for purpose or meaning in historical events and processes. As a result, they usually posit some sort of beginning like creation or a big bang, a goal that may or may not be directed by a divine being or power external to the historical process, and an end of history or its consummation.

By way of contrast, the cyclical view of history sees events occurring in endlessly repeated circles or cycles. What is happening today either has happened before or may be repeated some day. Historical events, just like the natural cycles of agriculture, recur time after time with no beginning, no end, and sometimes no meaningful significance. This view of history borrows much from ancient Greek thinking and from cosmological and anthropological ideas in oriental religions. In these systems of thought, the “goal” of the individual is to escape the realms of time and history, to be “redeemed” or “reincarnated” and, thereby, be free from the circular course of time and the meaninglessness of historical existence.

A third approach, the atomistic interpretation of history, which may be a spinoff of the cyclical model, discredits linear or teleological history as meaningless. Modern philosophy that is atheistic or existential ascertains no patterns and no goals in the succession of events called history. As a result, each person must try to find his or her own way from no meaning to

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purposeful existence by making significant decisions (e.g., by existential leaps of faith). But in this view history as a whole has no meaning or value.

Certainly, the two basic viewpoints—the progressive and the cyclist—have been refined and modified by modern historians. Whether or not history brings about improvement, perpetual and ineluctable, can be debated even by progressives. Some see devolution rather than evolution as the definitive principle. And not all cyclists debunk history as void of value, since they “see history as a process whose forces operate consistently while producing different effects from one period to another.” These modern refinements must be kept in mind when looking at historical events and trying to make sense of what is going on with respect to the bigger picture. The religious viewpoint, no doubt, adds another variable to interpretation and an unwieldy one at that. But it cannot be denied that religious beliefs and perceptions have contributed considerably to the history of the United States and have impacted widely the nation’s economics, politics, and its society and culture.

With respect to these levels, conflicts, and nuances of interpretation, this brief essay will survey two non-religious events in United States history, one in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth century. Each will be examined in light of the validity of either the progressive or cyclical view of history and, by way of counterpoint, examined from the opposing perspective. The extended impact on culture and society also will be discussed, and pedagogical assumptions for the teaching of American religion in a college survey course will be noted.

From 1840 to 1860, the population of the United States increased from roughly seventeen to thirty-one million, an increase of about eighty percent. About one-third of this increase came from European immigrants out of Ireland, Germany, England, and Scotland. By far, the most prosperous were the English and the Germans, because they could buy land in the United States. The poorest were the Irish peasants and laborers who settled in northern urban areas, took low-wage jobs (e.g., in factories, on construction projects, as servants), lived in unsanitary tenements, and suffered greatly from epidemics like cholera and yellow fever. There were a lot of different “push” factors, but the most significant for the Irish was the potato blight during the 1840s. Generally, these immigrant workers stayed away from the South but not entirely. For example, of the 194 foreign immigrants, or one percent of the total population, that came to Knox County, Tennessee during the decade ending in 1850, 114 (58%) were from Switzerland, 40 (20%) were from Ireland, 18 (9%) were from Germany, and 11 (5%) were from England. Of the 898 foreign immigrants (4% of the total population) that came to Knox County during the decade ending in 1860, 496 (55%) were from Ireland, 137 (15%) were from Switzerland, 130 (14%) were from Germany, and 97 (11%) were from England and Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The sizeable increase of Irish immigrants can be verified in southern as well as northern counties, although there might be exceptions in individual counties for a variety of reasons. The Irish immigration

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<sup>1</sup>David W Fletcher, *A Brief Report concerning Foreign Immigrants to Knox County, Tennessee, Decades Ending 1850 through 1880* (unpublished paper for GEOG 434, Historical Geography; Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Middle Tennessee State University, 1999), v., vii.

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was felt and, on the whole, resisted by the bulk of the populace who did not reap some economic benefit from the exploitation of their labor (compare the Mexican immigration situation in the United States currently).

This large influx of Irish immigrants disrupted American society in a number of ways. Economically, the Irish gave business-owners and managers a ready pool of cheap labor. Socially, this caused tension between the new Americans and blue-collar or proletariat workers who also depended on low-skill, low-wage jobs for their subsistence. And the proximity of the newly-arrived Irish and the established, indigenous Americans (i.e., so they thought) in already over-crowded neighborhoods and slums sparked animosity, hatred, and violence. Culturally, the “gypsy” Irish were European and much different in their manners, outlook, and patterns of life than those who had been born and raised in the United States. Worst of all, they were Roman Catholics in their beliefs, and this, more than anything else, condemned them in the eyes of the Protestant establishment and other civic leaders.

From 1840 to 1860, the Catholic Church in the United States tripled in size from less than 800 churches in 1840 to more than 2,500 by 1860. Irish and Bavarian or southern German immigration contributed considerably to this growth. As early as the 1830s, civic leaders, many of them Protestant, led the fight against what they perceived to be anti-republican Roman Catholic ideology (e.g., Pope Pius IX’s condemnation of republicanism as subversive of God’s sovereignty). Samuel Morse, who is celebrated for his invention of the electric telegraph, published *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* in 1835 that branded

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Roman Catholic immigrants as incorrigible criminals, deadbeats, and drunkards. In 1836, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, a pseudonymous anti-Roman Catholic diatribe that “disclosed” immoral behavior at a Montreal convent, became a best seller.

As leaders flamed the public’s fear of ethnic minorities, political radicals, and Roman Catholic aliens, Native American Clubs organized and lobbied for immigration quotas, native-born qualifications for elected officials, and the complete removal of the Roman Catholic Bible, that included the books of the Apocrypha, from public schools. In urban areas of the North where industry was growing, managers hired cheap immigrant labor (i.e., Irish Roman Catholics) that left others unemployed (i.e., Protestant workers). In some cities, Protestant workers joined mobs that attacked Catholic immigrants. The notable case was Philadelphia in 1845 where the convergence of economic, social, and religious issues ignited Roman Catholic versus Protestant street riots that left about thirty dead and perhaps hundreds wounded. The religious tension even occasioned the growth of secret societies, like the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, and the evolution of the short-lived American Party, or Know-Nothing Party, that nominated Millard Fillmore as its Presidential candidate in 1856 and promoted bans on immigration and literacy tests for voters as part of its anti-alien political platform.

What, then, should the student of history make of this outbreak of religious fervor as a result of Irish, Roman Catholic immigration in the mid-1800s? From the cyclist point of view, this represents the first of four periods of mass migration from foreign countries to the United States—1840 to 1890, 1890 to 1920, 1920 to 1960, and 1960 to the present time. This, of course,

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is just a repetitive, pervasive cycle of the historical process, that is, the geographical movement of groups of humans in response to their basic needs and the resultant socioeconomic and cultural conflicts, especially during an evolutionary period for industry and labor. This cycle of mass migration similarly could include the eras of exploration, colonization, and settlement, the compulsory ethnic migrations (i.e., of Indian tribes and African slaves), and the post-Revolutionary period, 1790 to 1820. The process repeats itself, even though certain effects like religious hostility may vary according to particular circumstances. For religious meanings, the Irish, Roman Catholic immigration to America parallels other religious interchanges between people who have already settled a place and their “invaders” who are trying to settle there (e.g., Indian tribes and Puritans who came to New England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, frontier families and Mormons who came to Missouri and Illinois in the 1830s and 1840s, “old-stock” Americans and Italian, Roman Catholics who came to the urban North in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, established Ashkenazi and East European Jews who came to New York City in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, etc.).

But there are differences and foreign immigration patterns represent more than just *deja vu*. Progressives, for this reason, argue contrary to cyclical sameness and suggest that some sort of teleology may be at work in the historical process. The Roman Catholic versus Protestant antagonisms of the mid-1800s in the United States certainly may be one of many such episodes in that historic religious struggle. And the peculiar nature of the struggle itself, as well as its context, can be explained on the basis of teleological models. For example, this was an important and inevitable phase in the evolution of the United States as a pluralistic religious

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society that has shaped the nation into a mosaic or patchwork of diverse cultural groups.

Contrariwise, but a progressive model as well (and a conservative Protestant one, to be sure), is the view that Roman Catholic incursion represented a devolution or another step in the departure in the United States from purity and holiness (i.e., a prophetic sign to be fulfilled before the Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the Eternal Age). Or, on a model designed to illustrate the decline of religion, the coming of modernity, and the secularization of United States culture, this was a necessary phase of religious conflict to show, as had been established in Europe, the futility of religious warfare in the United States. All of these interpretations propose a teleological hermeneutic, even though they disagree about what the *telos* or end might be.

From either viewpoint—that of the progressive or the cyclist—it is possible to converge socioeconomic, psychological, and religious angles of interpretation. I prefer personally to look at the event eclectically and give weight to religious factors wherever appropriate. In other words, it is not proper to force religious interpretations on the data. But when convergence of beliefs or values and the event itself is rather obvious, it is important to follow the religious interpretations first and then assign other factors their subsidiary role. To illustrate, the desire of Protestants to restrict use of the Roman Catholic Bible (with the Apocrypha) in public schools came from, foremost and primarily, a religious belief and value that had been taught, received, and accepted as part of a system of faith. But when convergence of beliefs or values and the event itself is obvious, it is important to follow the religious interpretations first and then assign other factors their subsidiary role. Whatever the economic, political, or social motivations or

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spinoffs, the discrediting of the books of the Apocrypha as part of the Christian canon of scripture must be seen as a religious phenomenon, especially in the United States in the mid-1800s. This may indicate, of course, the power of religion to legitimate and further polarize existing social divisions bred by other factors. The elusive cause-effect conundrum indeed can be difficult to manage. This does not discredit nor does it subordinate necessarily the role of belief in the formation of negative, as well as positive, opinions about individuals or groups that part company because they cannot agree on matters of deepest concern (i.e., ideas about things unseen).

In the early twentieth century in rural Rhea County, Tennessee, this deep chasm often dug by belief systems, including religious and nonreligious belief systems, became evident in what would have been ordinarily a simple and local civil trial. On the surface, the outlines of the trial of John Thomas Scopes, a young high school math and science teacher (but not a biology teacher), for violating Tennessee's anti-evolution law (i.e., the Butler Act) can be recounted briefly. In the summer of 1925, Scopes was indicted by the grand jury, and he stood trial for twelve days in July. On the final day, Scopes' defense conceded his guilt (i.e., they wanted to appeal the case to the Tennessee Supreme Court where they could challenge the legitimacy of the anti-evolution law), and Judge John T. Raulston brought the trial to an end. The jury deliberated only nine minutes and rendered a guilty verdict. Scopes was fined \$100 plus costs. His monthly salary as a teacher was only \$150, but the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) paid his fine.



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Organized as a lark by local businessmen in an effort to promote the small, fledgling town of Dayton, and in deference to the prodding of New York's ACLU that wanted to test Tennessee's new statute and ran advertisements in the local papers, the trial itself came across as so much good-natured monkeyshine. Scopes agreed to be the scapegoat, but he never took the witness stand during the trial and could not remember if he had ever taught evolution. Other actors, like the two main antagonists Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, dwarfed Scopes in the drama that played itself out in rural southeastern Tennessee as a grand battle between the forces of Darwinian evolution or science and biblical creation or religion.

The whole affair mushroomed beyond local and state levels to command national and worldwide attention. The World's Christian Fundamentals Association actively solicited the still-popular Bryan to help prosecute the case. And the ACLU recruited Darrow, known nationally for his defense of Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold and championed as a defender of the working class, the poor, and victims of injustice. Newspapers reported the trial on a daily basis, and magazine articles appeared within the year. Most importantly, Judge Raulston, in an unprecedented concession, allowed rearrangement of the courtroom and the installation of four microphones. WGN Radio of Chicago broadcast live coverage of the trial to the American public. Newsreel also made an impact, because people could see at theaters what they were reading about in their newspapers.

But for all the hoopla with its economic, legal, religious, and social ramifications, the Scopes' trial failed to settle the role of evolution in Tennessee's secondary biology curriculum.

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The Butler Act remained part of Tennessee law until its repeal by the state legislature in 1967.

After Scopes' conviction, other states, primarily in the South, introduced and passed anti-evolution bills. In Tennessee, the Scopes' trial embarrassed intellectuals, as national media portrayed rural southerners as uneducated, religious bigots. The trial ultimately came to be seen as a turning point in the bigger debate between fundamental Christianity with its literal reading of the Bible and its belief in creation and modernity that adhered to Darwinian evolution as a result of its belief in and reliance on the findings of scientific methods for questions about human origins.

The progressive interpretation of the Scopes' trial suitably can define the unique, unusual, and even bizarre nature of the event. This is true whether the progressive view sees the episode as favoring the long-range development of biblical, Protestant fundamentalism or as promoting the rise of modern, scientific understandings. Either way, the perspective of teleology can make a good argument, since the Scopes' trial itself stayed independent of the forces of both evangelical fundamentalism and scientific modernity. These broader cultural and religious concerns exploited the Scopes' trial to promote their own agendas. These agendas had developed for a long time before July 1925 and in a much larger context than Dayton, Rhea County, Tennessee, or even the United States. This view fits perfectly with the progressive outlook of the trial as a consequential event, a pivotal or even watershed moment, in the ongoing process toward a concrete and unavoidable goal.

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But a case can be made as well for the cyclical take on the Scopes' trial. Some historians of religion see the Dayton crucible as a key point in the transformation of Protestant fundamentalism in America (so George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925*, 1980), or a weakening from which fundamentalism did rebound eventually (so Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 1997). In addition, cyclists superimpose myths on the bald facts of Rhea County's experience during the summer of 1925. These myths, though, about the clash of two worlds—rural and urban, science and religion, liberal and conservative, modernity and fundamentalism—believe a deep-rooted, never-ending and cyclical process at work. And this sweeping struggle of opposites, similar to the “dialectic” in Hegel's thought, has many analogies, parallels, and repetition in the modern United States (e.g., see James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science*, 1997).

These ideological clashes go well beyond the machinations intended for Dayton by John T. Scopes and his fellow citizens, but, in a sense, they exemplify what religion is all about. This dichotomization is all the more relevant since the “separation” of science and religion as a result of Sir Francis Bacon's empirical methodology in the early seventeenth century. In this view, the Scopes' trial consequently did not depict the fall of fundamentalism nor the rise of modernity. The trial rather typified the pervasive cycles of life, the ups and downs, the twists and turns. It was another variation in the undulating path that stretches out before all human travelers. From a strict cyclist perspective, this may be the “ultimate” meaning to be found in the Scopes' trial.

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To conclude, to try to extract any unified sense of “American” religious identity from the plethora of opinions and the diversity of possibilities may be presumptuous. On the merits of cyclical versus progressive models and understanding, a generalized extraction about religion in the United States and its role toward the nation’s self-image might be possible. For sure, the Irish, Roman Catholic immigration in the mid-1880s and the Scopes’ trial in the early 1900s played important roles in the nation’s cultural formation.

From a reactionary viewpoint, the conservative and exclusively Protestant culture fought to preserve its status in social and legal arenas through attributes defined biblically and ecclesiastically. And Roman Catholics and Darwinian evolutionists fought back in order to maintain their place in American society. From an evolutionary outlook, the nation consciously expanded its ideological (and religious) umbrella to include Roman Catholics and those who believe in Darwinian evolution. These are both progressive ideas yet on different sides of the progressive coin.

Cyclical ideas would operate from a history of religions posture or take the perspective of a phenomenology of religions approach. For instance, the problems that developed as a result of the enormous influx of Irish, Roman Catholic immigrants was another round of Roman Catholic versus Protestant tensions that since the Protestant Reformation have occurred and will continue to occur until the cycle finally has played itself out in some fashion, if at all. The Scopes’ trial similarly was an episodic clash between religion (i.e., faith in Scripture’s testimony to Creation) and science (i.e., belief in the explanatory value of biological evolution according to

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Charles Darwin), something that has happened regularly since the rise of Darwinian thought in the United States. Alternately, each event revealed deeply felt or entrenched beliefs and their capacity for societal disruption. And these patterns of belief, as well as their periodic cycles, imbued life with meaning for the participants in each drama.

How might these religious meanings be conveyed to students in a college survey course? First, I would try to get students to examine their own beliefs so that each one can see more clearly his or her perspective about religion in the United States. Then, I would call attention to the relevance of each event and what might be called its “transcendent” meaning for the present. Next, I would want students to look at the contextual meaning of each event and how it fits into the bigger picture. Finally, if possible, I would ask students to put themselves in the place of the historical actors and attempt to ascertain what they felt, thought, liked, or disliked, that is, an empathetic and sympathetic analysis of the drama.