

# GeVa's 'Inherit the Wind' revives great creation debate

By Emily Morrison

The recent GeVa Theatre production of *Inherit the Wind* illuminated for local audiences a 60-year-old debate made surprisingly contemporary by renewed judicial controversy over the issue of how the earth was created. Within the physical confines of the Diocese of Rochester, a range of opinion exists as to the theological foundations of "evolutionism," "creationism" and hybrids that link the two extremes.

As the Supreme Court prepares to examine the 1981 Louisiana bill that requires that "creation science" accompany evolutionary theory in public school science curricula, a host of other Southern states takes up the banner of biblical "inerrancy." This supposition — which holds that every word of scripture was intended to be taken literally — inspired the legacy of 1920s-era Protestant fundamentalism that led in Tennessee to the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" decision, on which *Inherit the Wind* is based.

Ironically, 20th-century Catholic theologians appear to have largely avoided participation in the modern-day debate over human origins. In earlier centuries the bastion of opposition to scientific investigation, the Catholic Church has since mellowed considerably in its interpretation of scientific thought. Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler, Descartes and Newton all faced censure for their theories, and Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy in 1600.

Carolus Linnaeus, one of the earliest proponents of evolutionary beliefs, was criticized by Catholics and Protestants alike for his theory that biological species originated from created genera. When Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* was published in 1859, Church authorities opposed it, although they no longer had sufficient public support to make much headway against the theory of evolution.

By the latter part of the century, some degree of dissent by Catholic biblical scholars from the views espoused by the Vatican's Pontifical Biblical Commission was registered, according to Father Joseph Brennan, for many years a professor of theology at St. Bernard's Seminary and Institute, and now director of university religious affairs and associate professor in the University of Rochester's Department of Religious and Classical Studies. This dissension between Catholic theologians and the Vatican began to subside some 75 to 80 years ago when theologians undertook a careful literary analysis of biblical texts.

"During the late 1800s and early 1900s, much of the controversy continued but at a lower level of intensity and public visibility," wrote L. Duane Hunt in *How To Think About Evolution and Other Bible-Science Controversies* (Downers Grove, Ill.: In-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

In the recent GeVa Theatre production of *Inherit the Wind*, Gerald Richards portrayed defense attorney Henry Drummond, weighing the relative merits of the Bible and Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. The Drummond character was based on Scopes trial defense lawyer Clarence Darrow.

realize that the accounts in the Book of Genesis were not meant to give us a scientific statement on the origins of the world, but a religious interpretation of the creation of the world — its dependence on God, its basic goodness and the ways in which we've corrupted that goodness," Father Brennan explains.

Through the literary analysis of biblical texts, he continues, Catholic scholars have come to believe that such texts were not intended to be factual accounts, but instead "rather poetic and very popular compositions that are meant to convey religious truths. They're more in the line of the parables of Jesus than of historical narratives," he suggests.

"The argument is not over whether the Bible is true, but over what kind of truth it contains," says Father Brennan. "Most Catholic scholars today would not see its purpose as describing how the world came into being. That is not a religious question. Whether God created the world in six days, at the snap of a finger, or over six million or six billion years is really irrelevant to me from a religious point of view."

"As a scientist, I might be interested in this, but as a theologian, I have no practical concern with the manner in which God created the world," he adds.

Father Brennan, an Old Testament scholar who is also an expert on Jewish theology, cites the Jewish calendar as an example of an interpretation based on a literal acceptance of dates recorded in the Bible. The current Jewish year 5747 is the result of a computation extrapolated from biblical figures.

Such a literal interpretation, according to Father Brennan, "assumes that the people who wrote the Bible did so with the intention of giving us a scientific account — which I feel can't be defended in geological, archaeological or even biblical terms." No reputable Catholic scholar that Father Brennan is aware of would hold to such a position today.

There are, of course, individual Catholics who would vehemently disagree with Father Brennan's assessment of Catholic opinion on the issue of creation. In a recent letter to the *Courier-Journal*, R.J. Guth denounced evolutionary theory as "a known pet subject of avowed atheists and secular humanists," and a view that he believes "can lead to heretical indoctrination of Catholic students."

Guth recommends a four-volume book

written during the early 17th century by a Franciscan nun named Sister Mary Agreda, who transcribed in it what she believed were Marian revelations. According to Guth, Sister Mary Agreda wrote "that the earth and the heavens, Adam and Eve, were created in the year 5199 B.C. with man fully matured as well as all trees and fruits matured ... By simple arithmetic — adding 1986 years A.D. to 5199 B.C. — one gets 7,185 total years since God created the earth and man." Guth concluded his letter with the information that an abridged version entitled *City of God* can be ordered from TAN Books and Publishers, Rockford, Ill. 61105.

Belief in such a literal interpretation of Genesis is certainly as alive and well in upstate New York as it is in the Southern "Bible Belt." Father Brennan theorizes that the insistence on biblical inerrancy continues to surface today because of a rise in fundamentalism or literalism in contemporary society.

"That is a phenomenon that began outside the Catholic Church, but has had influence on Catholics. I interpret this as a desire or need on the part of many people to have absolute certainty on everything," he posits. "Catholics have traditionally found that in

**'I'm a scientist by training, but the Bible is not written as a science text. If you wanted to study physics or algebra out of the Bible, you'd flunk your midterm. It wasn't written for those things; it was meant as God's revelation of who He is to man.'**

**Palmer Johnson  
Elim Bible Institute**

infallible pronouncements of the pope; Protestants have found it in scripture," says Father Brennan (who qualifies such statements by noting that they are, of course, "gross oversimplifications" made for the sake of clarity and brevity during a newspaper interview).

"I believe that the Bible is inspired, is the word of God, and imparts to us religious truths that are of vital concern to us as human beings," says Father Brennan. "I also believe that the opening chapters of

Genesis are among the most magnificent passages in the Bible, and that they contain truths that are of immense importance to us today. I find them as moving and as inspiring as anyone does."

"The question, the point of debate, is what kind of truth these chapters impart — not whether they do impart truth," concludes Father Brennan, who adds that everything he's read leads him to believe "that the world as we know it did evolve in a very slow and gradual process. The evidence in favor of an evolutionary theory is far more convincing than the evidence against it."

Father Brennan is quick to emphasize, however, that such considerations are not his province. "It's not a question I've given much attention to. It's a scientific question," he cautions. In the realm of scientific theory, he declares, "I don't pretend to be an authority."

Although Father Brennan feels that, among Catholic theologians, at least, the whole question of literal interpretation of creation is a dead issue, he concedes that it remains very much alive for some people. Among them is Louisiana State Senator Bill Keith, who authored a bill passed by the Louisiana state legislature mandating balanced treatment for creation science wherever evolution is taught to public school children. Keith is also the author of a book entitled *Scopes II, the Great Debate* (Huntington House, Inc.: 1982), in which he does battle with what he terms "the religion of secular humanism."

The book can be found in the library of Elim Bible Institute, a three-year, non-denominational training institute for those called to ministry as pastors, missionaries, teachers in Christian schools and worship leaders. Founded in 1924 in Englewood, N.Y., by the Rev. Ivan Q. Spencer, the school settled in Lima in 1951, on the site of the former Genesee Wesleyan Seminary.

The Rev. Spencer saw as his mission the training of ministers for worldwide revival, and Elim developed into what is now the oldest Pentecostal Bible institute in the United States. "Elim" — referred to in Exodus 15:27 as a waystation for the Hebrews, who paused there for refreshment as Moses was leading them out of Egypt — means, literally, "oasis." The picturesque Lima campus resembles an oasis, and undoubtedly is one for charismatic and evangelical believers and leaders from all over the world.

A recent visit to Elim, undertaken in search of a definitive fundamentalist viewpoint on the evolution/creation controversy, yielded a surprising array of contradictions to the accepted stereotypes of Protestant evangelists. Articles in such periodicals as *Christianity Today* and *Trinity Journal*, also found in the Elim library, point out that many of the caricatures of fundamentalists conveyed by the secular media owe their inspiration and longevity to distorted national media coverage of the Scopes trial — and, indeed, to the negative portrayal of fundamentalist orator William Jennings Bryan in *Inherit the Wind*.

Director of communications Tom Miller dispels the notion that Elim is a fundamentalist institution. Indeed, "if militant opposition to modernism" and aversion to scientific or philosophical inquiry characterized the historic fundamentalism defined by George M. Marsden in his book *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1980), then Elim's theology faculty hardly fits the narrow confines of that specific category.

"We're conservative, not fundamen-

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