

2009 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Michel Serres has called René Girard “a new Darwin of culture but also a Doctor of the Church.” In a belated observance of the Darwin centennial, the organizers of COVR 2010 offer a showing of *Inherit the Wind*.

*Inherit the Wind* (1960) is a classic film, based on the 1955 Broadway stageplay by Jerome Laurence and Robert Edwin. The film fictionalizes the famous 1925 John Scopes (Monkey) Trial, which took place in Dayton, Tennessee. In that historic trial, William Jennings Bryant, a three-times candidate for president of the United States, assisted the state of Tennessee in its prosecution of John Scopes, a high school biology teacher, for teaching evolution in violation of the state’s Butler Act. Clarence Darrow argued in defense of Scopes. The trial was highly publicized. Journalist H. L. Mencken was among the reporters covering the trial and swaying public opinion against Bryant.

The film *Inherit the Wind* presents the characters Matthew Harrison Brady (played by Fredric March) and Henry Drummond (played by Spencer Tracy) as stand-ins for Bryant and Darrow, respectively. The fictional journalist E. K. Hornbeck (played by Gene Kelly) represents Mencken. Scopes appears in the person of Bertram Cates. The play and the film add a father-daughter pair, the Reverend Brown and his daughter Rachel (Bertram Cates’s fiancé), for whom there is no historical counterpart.

In the Scopes Monkey Trial, as in *Inherit the Wind*, theological and legal issues blurred. The real question was never the guilt of Scopes under the state’s law, but the justice of the law itself and its relation to religion and science. The underlying question is whether the Biblical and the evolutionary teachings conflict with or complement each other.

*Inherit the Wind* is arguably a Girardian parable. It enacts a cultural transformation of violence, even as it focuses on questions of evolution, guilt, and law. The people of the little town of Hillsboro find their way of life, their communal identity, under stress. They initially unite against a single victim, the schoolteacher Cates. The language of the Satanic and the threat of lynching are ever present, as one potential victim after another is singled out. The prosecutor (Bryant) and the defender (Drummond) are brother-like. The film ends dramatically with Bryant’s death in the courtroom. The film shows an understanding of the scapegoat mechanism, but does it succeed, finally, in defending the innocence of its actual victim?