Eighty years after one of the most famous court cases in American history, the teaching of evolution in public schools is again being challenged on religious grounds in school districts across the nation, with the latest case coming from Pennsylvania.

While carrying a new name, the movement labeled “intelligent design” by its supporters is essentially the same as the anti-evolution side in the 1925 case of Scopes v. Tennessee, says Charles A. Israel, author of “Before Scopes.” The book is a recently published history of the clash of cultures that led to the Scopes trial — conflicts that continue in many parts of the nation today.

“The intelligent design movement represents the evolution of creationism, and its purpose is to discredit evolution,” said Charles A. Israel, an associate professor of history at Auburn University. But, he adds, many of its backers believe that evolution, as taught in public schools, is an attempt by skeptics to discredit their religion.

If the Scopes trial were today, the great orator and Scopes prosecutor William Jennings Bryan would probably argue in support of intelligent design, said Israel, who examined the Scopes legacy in the concluding chapter of the book published by the University of Georgia Press in 2004.

The current debate, as in previous encounters since the late 19th century, pits conservative religious leaders who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, such as Bryan in 1925 and school board members in the current Pennsylvania case, against scientists and science teachers who regard attempts to mix religion and science as bad science and bad religion.

The classic play and movie “Inherit the Wind” leaves the impression that science teacher John Scopes won the case, destroying the anti-evolution movement. Despite a brilliant courtroom performance on his behalf by Clarence Darrow, Scopes lost his challenge to a Tennessee law barring schools from teaching about evolution. Even when the state appeals court overturned Scopes’ conviction, it allowed the law to stand. Israel said the law, which was on the books until 1967, had a chilling effect on science teaching and research in Tennessee and much of the South.

The issue was largely dormant for decades following the Scopes trial but reemerged during the Cold War as schools increased their emphasis on science education. In their opposition to the teaching of evolution, many fundamentalist Christians sought to have their local school boards require “equal time” for the biblical account of creation. When those efforts consistently failed in the courts, intelligent design arose as an alternative. In their attempt to bypass the First Amendment obstacles that blocked the teaching of creationism in the schools, advocates of intelligent design infer but usually avoid direct mention of God as the intelligent force behind the design of the universe.

Israel said the arguments on behalf of intelligent design have an advantage over earlier attempts to undercut the teaching of evolution. “The strongest appeal of intelligent design is to Americans’ sense of fairness,” said Israel. “Its supporters argue that intelligent design is another theory equal or superior to evolution, so, if you are going to teach one in a science course, why not teach the other?”

Scientists have always had a difficult time explaining the complexities of evolution to the vast majority of people who do not have a scientific background, Israel said. The problem is compounded, he said, by the difference between the popular idea of theory as unproven conjecture and scientists’ definition of theory as a testable hypothesis with substantial supporting evidence.

Israel notes that each side sees the other as its enemy in the culture wars: Some Christians see teaching of evolution as an attack on their religion through their children. Skeptics in the scientific community, meanwhile, see intelligent design as a wedge to undercut science and return state-sponsored religion to public education.

“Too often the question is asked whether a person believes in evolution or in God, presenting a particularly stark choice that is actually rejected by many scientists and theologians,” the Auburn faculty member said.

“Unfortunately, rich theological discussions of the role of God in nature — as well as philosophical inquiries about the nature of scientific enterprise — get lost in the simplistic binary of ‘whose side are you on: God or Darwin?’” he said, adding that most people see no need to choose between science and religion.

The historian says scientists are correct in opposing teaching of intelligent design alongside evolution in high school science courses because, unlike evolution, the theory cannot be tested scientifically. But he adds that the theory of intelligent design is a natural fit for philosophy courses, which already include the concept, if not the name, in the study of great philosophers since ancient times.