

Creation mysteries: The evolution debate

From the Editors in the [August 25, 1999](#) issue

Forty percent of Americans favor teaching "creation science" instead of evolution in public schools. Fully 68 percent would like to see creationism taught alongside evolution. Given those figures, the decision by the Kansas Board of Education in August to downgrade the teaching of evolution should not come as a shock.

We might well expect other states to take similar actions, especially since the Kansans apparently have found a legal way to discourage the teaching of evolution. The board did not mandate the teaching of creationism—a move that has been construed by the courts as the imposition of a religious belief and hence a violation of the First Amendment. Instead, it revised state standards to make the teaching of evolution optional, thereby encouraging local schools to omit the topic from their classrooms.

Actually, the Kansas board did not object to all forms of evolutionary theory. It retained references to "micro" evolution, which, according to Cathy Toelkes of the Kansas Department of Education, refers to adaptations within a given species. What the board objected to was teaching about "macro" evolution—theories about the creation of new species by way of natural selection. In short, the board acknowledged the cogency of evolutionary thinking, but sought to limit its application. This strategy reflects a longstanding theme among the proponents of creation science: the more "theoretical" the science, the more it can be dismissed as sheer speculation and bad science.

We can sympathize with the antievolutionists insofar as they attack the way evolutionary thought often becomes aligned with an option for atheism, reasoned or assumed. Some proponents of evolution within the scientific community insist that natural selection and evolutionary adaptation constitute an exhaustive explanation for the form and behavior of all life (including all human behavior, whether gestures of caring or male promiscuity). Such thoroughgoing naturalists tend to rule out any

place for God and God's ongoing relation with an evolving world. This is indeed to offer a scientific faith, one that reaches far beyond what can be established on scientific grounds.

To object to "theory," however, as the Kansas board does, displays a misleading view of science, which is all about the making and testing of theories. In scientific practice, the difference between exploring "micro" and "macro" evolution is not nearly as sharp as the Kansas board believes. Evolutionary theory remains—until something better comes along—an indispensable resource for the "macro" project of investigating the fossil record, human origins, and the evidence that different species may have a common ancestor.

The story that evolutionary biology tells about the creation is, let's admit, a strange and in some ways properly disturbing mystery for Christians. There are all those billions of years before life began, and then millions of years before homo erectus emerged. What was God up to? Creaturely humility, not a flight from reason, prompts us to confess that creation remains a mask as well as a revelation of God's purposes. Its mysteries remind us, as God reminded Job, that none of us was present when God laid the foundation of the earth, and none of us can comprehend the depth of what we have been given through God's creative word.