

Questioning creationism

by [Kathleen L. Housley](#) in the [October 13, 1999](#) issue

Tower of Babel: Against the New Creationism, by Robert T. Pennock

In August the Kansas Board of Education voted to delete from the state's science curriculum standards virtually any mention of evolution and of the Big-Bang theory. Flying in the face of recommendations made by a state-appointed committee of 27 scientists and professors, a creationist board member rewrote the sections dealing with evolution. His revised version was approved by a 6-4 vote after months of deadlock. Clearly, the creationist movement is gaining strength, armed with fresh strategies to circumvent the constitutional requirement of church-state separation.

This turn of events makes Robert T. Pennock's book especially timely. The tower of Babel is his image for disagreements and confusion within the ranks of creationists. It also refers to Pennock's unusual method of analyzing evolutionary theory by looking at the development of languages. The book's subtitle makes clear Pennock's unequivocal position on the new creationism, as exemplified by the intelligent design movement (the force behind the Kansas Board of Education decision). Pennock states that creationists, whether they couch their arguments in the language of the Victorian age or the information age, are wrong in making scientific naturalism and atheism synonymous. In his words, just because "science says nothing about God is not to say that God is nothing."

A philosopher at the University of Texas at Austin, Pennock is a scholar of the history and philosophy of science, and a member of the Society of Friends (Quaker). He demonstrates that the old and new creationist approaches rely heavily on negative arguments instead of positive proofs. He discusses sophisticated new euphemisms, such as "abrupt appearance theory" and "initial complexity theory," which, like intelligent design theory, superficially appear to be nonreligious and scientific, thereby making them seem acceptable for public school curriculums. Pennock shows that proponents of these theories hold to a literal reading of Genesis in private. In public, they present the secular-style argument that because matter is irreducibly complex, preexisting information must have guided its creation.

One of the time-honored strategies of creationists is to point to disagreements among scientists about the interpretation of evidence. Pennock recommends looking at the major disagreements between creationist groups. Such analysis can help students grapple with the nature of scientific evidence. For example, teachers can show how Old Earth creationists defend their position against New Earth creationists, who believe the world is only 6,000 years old. Since Pennock intends the book to be in part a field guide to help science teachers understand who is attacking them and why, these suggestions are the book's principal strength.

Seeking a fresh pedagogical approach to evolutionary theory, Pennock uses the analogy of a linguistic model which explains how multiple languages developed from one proto-language. "Linguistic evolution has strong theoretical parallels with biological evolution both in content and in the sort of evidence scientists use to draw conclusions about it," he writes, "but it is also pointedly relevant to creationism, in that Genesis tells us that languages did not evolve but were specially created by God in the great confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel."

Pennock's inspiration for his project comes partly from attending a talk at which a leader of the intelligent design movement attacked philosophical naturalism, claiming that the purported evidence for evolution was merely scientific dogma propped up by speculative philosophy. Pennock subsequently realized that creationists question the entire methodological foundation of science. They do not recognize that scientific truth is evidence-based and, therefore, never absolute. New evidence requires that old "truths" be revised or abandoned.

Pennock also came to understand creationists' fear that evolution undermines morality and our sense of life's purposes. Opposing it, then, takes on aspects of a holy war. Pennock's response, which draws heavily on classical philosophy for the origins of morality and value, is unlikely to assuage that fear.

Though Pennock's book is occasionally redundant, especially on the nature of scientific methodology, he brings fresh insight to a debate that shows no signs of ending.