

ONE UNIVERSE, UNDER GOD

Creationism battles for the hearts and minds
of America's teachers.

BY LIZA LENTINI
ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHIA TAREEN

When a Kansas sky is dark and looming, natives are, ironically, content. A torrential day is, for them, better than one characterized by a swing in temperature, odd winds, and as one local describes it, “a strangeness in the air” that signals an impending tornado. On one particularly rainy day in Wichita, the roads are flooded in deep, thick puddles, and with the rain estimated to continue for the next four days, it seems positively biblical.

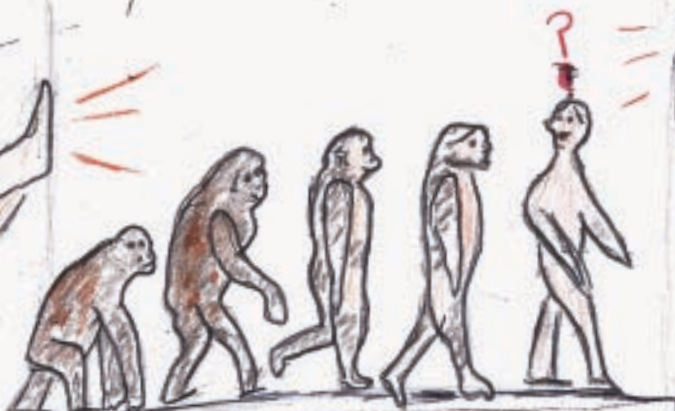
Off the main drag in northeast Wichita sits New Song Academy, a bright brick building with a charming cul-de-sac and bright green bushes. The entrance is a cheerful reflec-

STATE OF SCIENCE

IN
AMERICA.



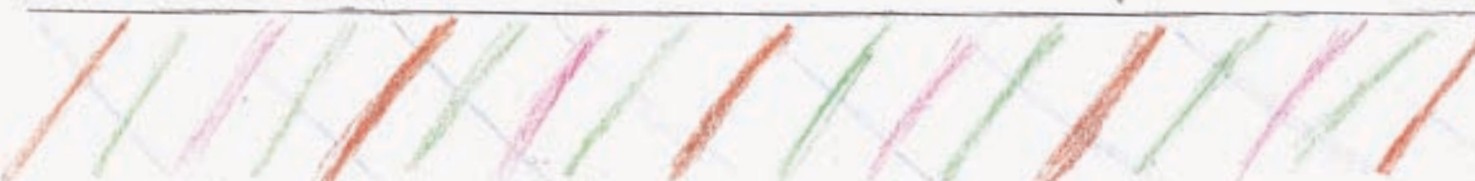
SCIENTISTS OF AMERICA



Evolution



INTELLIGENT DESIGN



tion of its name, and one is immediately greeted by a fresco of Noah's ark, an image repeated on the sofa pillows, in other paintings, a patchwork quilt, and crafted items enclosed in a locked glass case. Statues of elephants, giraffes, and lions sit poised and motionless, two by two. At the front desk, cheery Linda clicks on the loudspeaker to start the day. "Good morning, teachers and boys and girls. Let's fold our hands and bow our heads and close our eyes and get ready to speak to God this morning. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this wonderful day. Thank you for all the many blessings you give us. Each and every day. Please watch over our teachers, watch over our mommies and daddies today, and bring them safely back to us this afternoon. Help us to listen to our teachers and do the things you would like us to do in your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

New Song Academy is a private Christian school whose students range from infancy through grade six. If the word "Christian" has become taboo in certain quarters, the words "Christian school" are utterly detonating. But the nondenominational New Song Academy has nothing to apologize for. As owner and executive director Phyllis Lowen states, they don't adhere to a method of teaching that involves "shoving anything down their throats."

Amy White is young, blond, and greets her students with "sweetheart" and a kind voice that never alters, even when she needs to use a firm hand. A young boy gets up out of his seat and comes to her for help. "Go back to your seat and raise your hand, sweetheart," she says. "Manners and discipline are very important here," Amy tells me. "Even after lunch they get a cookie, but only if they've used two 'pleases' and two 'thank yous.'" Behavior is noted by a colored square stuck beside the child's name in a large decorative plaque hanging at the back end of the classroom. Blue is the best, yellow a first runner-up, and red indicates a trip to the office. Today every child has a blue square by his name. It's a good day.

The morning begins with two pledges, the Pledge of Allegiance, and then a similar, revised version, to God. This summer Amy has grades one through six in her schoolroom, lessons distinguished by individual needs. They pray before their snack—a cupful of Cheerios—and thank God.

New Song Academy uses A Beka Books, Christian science texts that, according to A Beka's Web site, "present the universe as the direct creation of God and refute the man-made idea of evolution." The lessons are otherwise incredibly similar to anything in the public school sector. The students are introduced to atoms and plants, molecules and the universe, with "reminders" at the beginning and end of each lesson that these are God's laws and creations. One of the children's science books is called *Investigating God's World*, which starts off with a friendly reminder: "Science is possible because we live in an orderly world that operates according to a well-designed plan. As we study science, we are really studying the works of God." At the top of one of the lesson pages, in the header, reads a verse from the Bible: "Do all things without murmurings and disputings. Philippians 2:14."

"We tell them to keep an open mind," Amy says. "We don't tell them what to believe."

Mid-afternoon the children line up for "chapel," and today they're performing. Obediently they form two lines and file out across the decorated hallway strewn with pasted pictures they'd posted from their creationism class the week before. The title on each page is "God Made . . ." and they'd cut out pictures to demonstrate that God has made everything from the flowers to Earth itself. A collage of their images displays itself brightly.

Chapel service for these kids is an array of enthusiastic songs about their love for God, complete with Macarena-esque turning and wiggling, hand gestures, and air guitars. In the background, enigmatically, an audience of puppets bob their heads along with the music. Several things are clear: These are happy, disciplined children who love going to school, and love Jesus.

Jerald McClenahan might get some of New Song's students when they're ready to move on to high school. Berean Academy—a nondenominational Christian school—is 35 miles northeast of Wichita off a country road in Elbing. A science instructor for grades 9 through 12, Jerald doesn't actually use a text, finding A Beka Books "contrived." "They seem to just throw in some Scripture verses. They don't integrate [creationism and evolution] well. I don't want [my students] to be self-righteous." He chooses to start his life science classes off simply, and with the book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. . . . And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the wa-

AT THE TOP OF ONE OF THE LESSON PAGES READS A VERSE FROM THE BIBLE: "DO ALL THINGS WITHOUT MURMURINGS AND DISPUTINGS."

ters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good."

"God created order and duty," Jerald says. "He's created this world. And this gives us insight into His character. The world is really a revelation of God in His greatness, evidence of His love for us." How then would you explain tragedy in the world? I ask. "God gave us this great Earth. It was a beautiful place, but because of our sins the Earth will be cursed. It's because of our abysmal mess-ups that we have bugs, crop failures, disease. Death came after sin. The Earth is cursed. God is kind to let us live. God is love, but He is righteous." Were there dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden? "Oh, yes!" he says. "Everyone loves the dinosaurs, don't they? How do I know? Because the Scriptures talked about the deluge of Noah, and before that the dinosaurs were around. They must have died off or drowned. That makes them antediluvian—before the flood." How do you explain medical science? "Well, it's not a threat to my scientific principles to believe in miracles. There were miracles in the Gospels."

Jerald's science students are asked to do exercises to learn how to look inside themselves on a spiritual level. "Some kids say they would like to be a better daughter or son. Some say they'd like to learn how to understand God better, serve Him, be more loving towards Him. God gives us the raw material and we do

the best we can. But when we see God as our Creator, it helps us.” And then he adds, “The term ‘evolution’ is misused. Earth scientists have an issue as to where the universe came from. The process of evolution is a biological thing, and species change. I don’t believe He created variations in species—the Pekingese and the poodles. But God created all species so that they can change. But the word ‘evolution’? Conservative scientists don’t use that word.”

I ask him what became of the Garden of Eden. “I don’t honestly know,” he says. “The Scriptures don’t say what happened to it. I’m guessing it looks like my garden, filled with weeds and deterioration.” And then Jerald McClenahan, science instructor, perks up a bit and declares, “But I do believe along with the Garden of Eden, He gave us the solar system, and the heaven, moon, and the stars.”

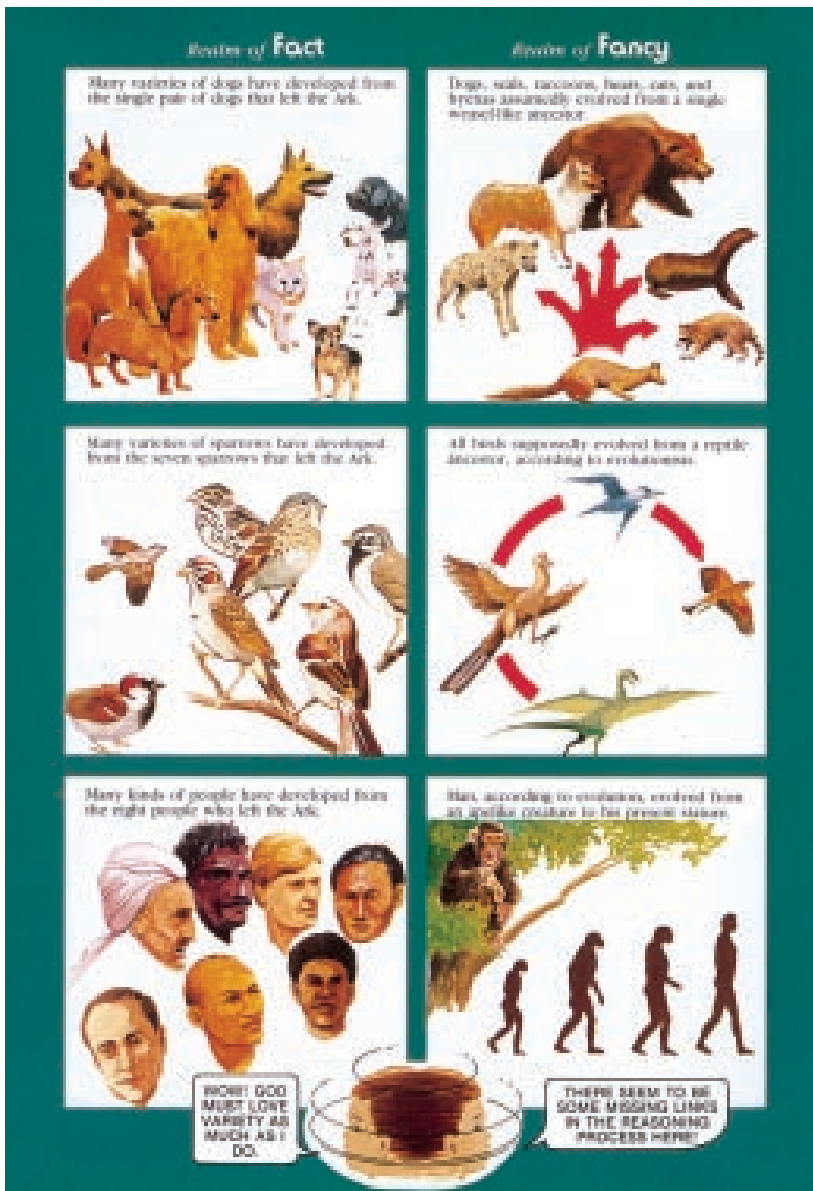
On the outskirts of Americus, Kansas, population 950, science teacher Karen Heins can make the earth move. Sort of. It’s a reputation that precedes her, says one of her fellow staff, demonstrating the link between small-town gossip and legend. “I don’t know how she does it,” the perpetrator of this legend told me, with assurance and enthusiasm, “but she has a way to create an earthquake right in the classroom. You can feel it under your feet.” When Karen Heins hears this, she lets out a girlish giggle, belying her pragmatic appearance. “It’s a seismograph,” she says, laughing, of the mechanism she purchased for her fifth- through eighth-grade students. “It measures earthquakes, it doesn’t create them.” Americus boasts a post office, café, library, and one elevator for farmer’s feed. Technically speaking, Karen and her family don’t live in Americus but in a “small town right outside.” Karen is a native Kansan with two sons in the public school system. Karen has taught public school science for 22 years. For 20 of those summers, she’s gone back to school herself to keep abreast of new methods of teaching. On weekends she works at a greenhouse, admits her flowers are her passion, and offers that it’s hard to explain the beauty of flowers with science. “It had to come from somewhere,” she says, referring to the mystic ways



ILLUSTRATION BY ASHLEY DEMING

of the world. “It had to come from somewhere.”

As a devout Christian, Karen is faced with an internal battle that has resonated in the public school system nationwide for the past two years: the belief in intelligent design versus evolution, and the consequent undermining of the latter. With a subject that has created such political fury, for teachers like Karen, the debate starts at home, and sometimes at church. For all the laws and regulations, monitoring the insertion of intelligent design materials in every school is nearly impossible. Even for a small-town teacher like Karen Heins, sometimes the battle just isn’t worth the fight. At her last teaching job, “at a real small town,” a particularly influential minister was encouraging teachers to “spread the Word” among their young ones in any way they could. Karen was teaching science then and found the atmosphere to be too insufferable to describe. “I would never go against what was given to



A page from *Biology: God's Living Creation*, a popular creationist text for high school students. The text is one of several published by A Beka Books, an "unashamedly Christian" (its words) publisher in Florida.

me by my administration," she says, referring to the prescribed science curriculum. "Your administration is very clear about what you should teach." Other teachers apparently did go against it, at the urging of their community's religious leader. Karen shakes her head in dismay. "When people think of school they think only of the teachers, but everyone in school influences a child. Everyone on staff. Everyone makes up a child's education. I had a friend who pulled her child out of that school to homeschool him, that's how bad it was."

Before Alaska and Hawaii achieved statehood in 1959, Kansas was the geographic center of the United States—an appropriate analogy, as it seems to serve as the epicenter of the ongoing debate about the separation of church and state in schools. On October 27, 2005, the National Academy of Sciences and

the National Science Teachers Association released a joint statement regarding the Kansas Science Education Standards (KSES). The statement was meant to create an end to the ongoing debate about creationism and intelligent design, and the teaching of the ideologies in the classroom. It confirms that the KSES "deleted text defining science as a search for natural explanations of observable phenomena, blurring the line between scientific and other ways of understanding." In an attempt to defend the teaching of evolution, the statement goes on to reprimand, "emphasizing controversy in the theory of evolution—when in fact all modern theories of science are continually tested and verified—and distorting the definition of science" as "inconsistent with our Standards and a disservice to the students of Kansas."

It was this very debate that divided Dover, Pennsylvania, a once-sleepy town of just 1,800 whose troubles seem to be benchmarked by the publication in 2004 of a new pro-intelligent design (ID) curriculum by William Buckingham, the controversial curriculum committee chair. This launched a national frenzy of debate and ripped apart the town and its educational system. In September 2005, in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, 11 parents sued the Dover Area School District over a pro-intelligent design disclaimer the school board required to be read when evolution was taught. A judge ruled that the Dover mandate was unconstitutional, and in the November 2005 school board election, 8 of the 9 ID supporters were voted out (the ninth was not up for reelection at that time). The battle left Dover infamous.

Eric Greiner, who has been teaching biology in the Pennsylvania public school system for six years, is a practicing Christian, and does not believe in human evolution. "I do not believe that our bodies have evolved to what they are today by chance or random mutations. The human body is too intricate and each system perfectly enhances our ability to perform as a whole. There has to be something bigger, and I believe

God is what made it possible and perfect." In the classroom, Eric rarely deals with human evolution, and therefore doesn't feel the conflict between his teachings and his personal beliefs, but

"WE TELL THEM TO KEEP AN OPEN MIND," AMY SAYS. "WE DON'T TELL THEM WHAT TO BELIEVE."

if a student questions them, he lets them know they're free to choose. "Every now and then, I have a student that will bring up religion and evolution. I would reiterate that this is what scientists believe and that they don't have to agree with them and that, not to get into detail, but there are things that I don't believe, and that it's OK for them not to agree with it either."

The crux of the issue lies in the distinction between intelligent

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design and creationism, and whether or not there's a difference between the two. For some, creationism is the belief that God created the universe and all things in it. Intelligent design, by slight contrast, does not claim that the universe is God's work specifically but asserts that it materialized from a purposeful (and not random) design by an intelligent being. According to Glenn Branch, deputy director of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), intelligent design's "vagueness" serves an insidious double duty: "First, by not taking a stand on issues that divide creationists, the intelligent design movement hopes to maintain a big tent under which creationists of all stripes are welcome to shelter. Second, by not identifying the designer as God, the intelligent design movement sought to immunize the position from constitutional scrutiny: The idea was to purge creationism of its overt religiosity, so that intelligent design could succeed where creation science failed."

It's this blurred distinction that caused problems for Dawn Wendzel and Julie Olson, two biology teachers in Michigan's Gull Lake Community Schools. After it was discovered that Dawn and Julie were teaching evolution side by side with intelligent design, the books they used (including *Of Pandas and People*, also famous in the Dover case) were pulled from

the classrooms. In response, Dawn and Julie approached the Thomas More Law Center, which also represented Dover in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, and threatened a lawsuit. According to Richard Thompson, president and chief counsel at Thomas More, Dawn and Julie's method of presenting the material and asking the students to pick a theory and debate it, based on the evidence, is a method of teaching that's supported by the judicial concept of academic freedom: that teachers and students have the right to pursue knowledge, wherever it may lead. Richard Ramsey, superintendent of the Gull Lake school district, remembers the case, even though "we haven't thought about ID in a while . . . not a topic we'd like to revisit, to tell you the truth." He recounts that *Of Pandas and People* was actually on a long list of books to be considered for use in the classroom, though "no one really knew what it was," and he claims that the administration didn't purchase the book.

As a result of the controversy, Ramsey's team conducted a statewide survey of Michigan public schools' science programs and found not one that thought ID was beneficial in a science class. "Intelligent design is a topic that has value in a social studies or current events class," Ramsey says. "Students benefit from having conversations about controversial topics, but I do not believe that intelligent design belongs in a science class as an alternative to evolution." Dawn and Julie refused repeated requests to be interviewed for this story. Ac-

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According to Ramsey, Julie accepted an early buyout, and will no longer be teaching in the Gull Lake school system; Dawn still teaches there.

Harry and Charlotte McDonald were science teachers in Kansas for over 30 years, and in their retirement they have maintained their activism for evolution in the public school sector. Harry has served on several committees for the Kansas State Department of Education, and Charlotte has been active at the state level by serving on the State Science Curriculum Council for a number of years. Charlotte is also a board member for Kansas Citizens for Science, an organization conceived in 1999 "to combat the radical religious right's attack on quality science standards for Kansas." As the president of Kansas Citizens for Science, Harry received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching in 2003. Harry and Charlotte do not consider ID to be science, and Harry feels that the outrage in the educational system has accomplished a climate similar to that of 1925's Scopes trial, which forced evolution out of biology texts. "This controversy is a symptom of a larger problem in our society," Harry says. "Information is considered 'valid' only if it agrees with our preconceived notion of reality. Science is considered a tool to help convince people to adopt a certain political opinion. If the scientific consensus disagrees with that



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opinion, political appointees rewrite the reports, and dissenters are left off of science advisory boards.”

Teachers like Harry and Charlotte believe there’s a frightening movement in America toward anti-intellectualism. Intelligent design is a movement that theology professor William Dinges of the Catholic University of America calls “a backdoor antievolution initiative, an attempt to turn science on itself and, paradoxically, reject its hegemonic influence. It’s an affirmation of the efficacy of biblical literalism, an attempt to make Genesis scientifically respectable, the latest twist in the (pseudo)saga of ‘science vs. religion.’” Organizations like the Institute for Creation Research and Answers in Genesis are promoting the theory of intelligent design. NCSE’s Glenn Branch is concerned that “their thinking, presumably, was that getting intelligent design in the public schools would at least accomplish a lot of what they wanted, if not all.”

In 2005, the NCSE monitored more than 100 challenges to evolution education, a record year. In May of 2007, despite the high-profile Dover ruling that intelligent design is not science, school board chairman Thomas J. Doland of Chesterfield County, Virginia, came under fire from parents for not introducing pro-ID textbooks into his classrooms. In response he issued an equivocal statement expressing sympathy for the parents’ point of view: “To suggest that we should limit our students’ access to specifically approved textbooks and instructional ma-

terials would not only inhibit self-directed learning but would also ill-prepare our young people for the challenges that will face them in the competitive global market of the 21st century. We must never confuse the requirement for religious neutrality of the government with the rights of our students to engage in religious expression.”

But for teachers like Karen Heins the line is clearly drawn. A Christian who encourages her students to keep an open mind, she sticks to her curriculum and does right by her administration. Still, the open mind is key. “There always has to be something more,” she says, “and we need to be open for that. But that’s what I love about science. It’s always new and interesting. Something that you thought was set in stone, scientists find out that’s not the way it was. We’re always learning more.”

Jerald McClenahan thinks that all this debate over creationism versus evolution is a shameful distraction from the real issues, those pertaining to morals. “Euthanasia, abortion, sexual behavior . . . we need to make students aware.” He teaches nights at a local college where he meets a lot of staunch “evolutionists,” and they somehow manage to meet in the middle. “The conservative Christian community rides this issue,” he says with dismay, and surprising objectivity. “Creation in and of itself is a mysterious thing. Only God knows.” And then he adds, with a laugh, “I hope God made a video of the whole thing, and when I’m up in heaven some day He’ll let me watch.”

“I really do hope we can solve this problem,” says the distraught cab driver taking me back to the southern side of Wichita. The discussion flips when he discovers that I was raised Catholic. “I know a Web site that can set the story straight,” he says. “You’ll see pictures of nuns marching with the Nazis. The Catholic Church is nothing but smoke screens.” According to him, these smoke screens have allowed the Catholics to get away with beheading, savage cannibalism, and torture for centuries. Red-handed. He’d learned this through the preachings of a local radio evangelist and the Web sites this preacher sends his audience to.

The driver goes on. “As the Bible says, ‘Every man beith a liar, and only the word of God is true.’ Everyone knows science only confirms God’s great creations. Even Darwin repented before he died.” He takes a pause and thinks for a moment. “Well, that’s what I hear . . . not sure if it’s true or not. You might want to look that one up.”

Back at New Song Academy, the day’s daily Bible study starts with a reminder of the Nicodemus story, and his quest to seek out Jesus and ask him how to get to heaven. After many little hands and squeals go up, it’s revealed that Jesus told Nicodemus that the way to go to heaven was to be born again.

“But how could that be?” asks Mrs. White. “How can someone be born again? What does that mean?”

“It means accepting Jesus into your heart,” says a golden-haired girl.

“That’s right,” Amy White says.

A young boy pipes up: “That’s because they didn’t have time machines. Their technology wasn’t all that great back then.” ■

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