

The initial letter which attracted our attention

Daily Telegraph

February 9th 2009 Darwin ceasefire

SIR – The 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, one of Britain’s most brilliant scientists, falls on Thursday.

We are concerned that, according to recent research by ComRes for the public theology think tank Theos, only 37 per cent of people in the United Kingdom believe that Darwin’s theory of evolution is (to quote the question used in this survey of more than 2,000 respondents) “so well established that it’s beyond reasonable doubt”.

Evolution, we believe, has become caught in the crossfire of a religious battle in which Darwin had little interest. Despite his own loss of Christian faith, he wrote shortly before his death: “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist and an evolutionist.”

We respectfully encourage those who reject evolution to weigh the now overwhelming evidence, hugely strengthened by recent advances in genetics, which testifies to the theory’s validity.

At the same time, we respectfully ask those contemporary Darwinians who seem intent on using Darwin’s theory as a vehicle for promoting an anti-theistic agenda to desist from doing so, as they are, albeit unintentionally, turning people away from the theory.

In this year of all years, we should be celebrating Darwin’s great biological achievements and not fighting over his legacy as some kind of anti-theologian.

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Inayat Bunglawala

Dr Francis Collins

Former Director, National Human Genome Research Institute, United States

Professor David Cutler

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Professor Martin Evans

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Professor Susan Greenfield

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Former Lecturer in Immunology, University of London

Professor Nancy Rothwell

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Justin Thacker

Head of Theology, Evangelical Alliance

Baroness Mary Warnock

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Paul Woolley

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Our reply NB this letter was edited by the Telegraph. What was actually submitted follows the version which was published in the paper.

Daily Telegraph Feb 13th 2009

Criticising Darwin

SIR – We are bemused that your distinguished correspondents (Letters, February 9) express concern that only 37 per cent of the British population find Darwin’s theory of evolution convincing.

They might consider that the problem is that neo-Darwinism has far outrun its basis in scientific evidence.

While the evidence for evolutionary adaptation, modification and variation within species – which is what Darwin actually discovered – is secure, the evidence for how complex organisms developed is modest in the extreme.

Is it surprising that there is a degree of incredulity that random mutation and natural selection alone can account for the vast complexity of life?

A much more open and honest debate is needed. If we lose a spirit of critical inquiry, even about Darwinism, we dishonour the pursuit of science.

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The original

Darwin: ceasefire or genuine controversy?

We are somewhat bemused that your distinguished correspondents (Darwin ceasefire, Feb 9th) express concern that only 37% of the UK population find Darwin's theory of evolution convincing. Instead of implying malevolence on the part of the creationists and the new atheists, they might consider that the problem is that neo-Darwinism has far outrun its base in scientific evidence.

In claiming that there is 'overwhelming evidence' for evolution, it might be more honest to point out the kind of 'evolution' for which there is overwhelming evidence. It doesn't take long to work out that while the evidence for evolutionary adaptation, modification and variation within species – which is what Darwin actually discovered – is secure, the evidence for how complex organisms developed from simpler ones is modest in the extreme.

Perhaps the figure your correspondents should focus on in the Theos survey is the 51% of the population who find Intelligent Design a credible position. Is it surprising that there is a degree of incredulity that random mutation and natural selection alone can account for the vast complexity of life? Might there not be good reason to wonder if the scientific evidence sustains such a claim? The complexity of cellular systems and the huge information content of DNA, about which the public is becoming increasingly aware, demand much more sophisticated explanations.

Christopher Booker (Sunday Telegraph Feb 8th) contends, correctly in our view, that 'what is fascinating about the Darwinists is their inability to accept just how much they do not know'. We submit that what is needed is a much more honest and open debate about the scientific evidence relating to origins and less of the obligatory endorsement of neo-Darwinism.

The history of science provides several examples of how a much vaunted idea was found to be vacuous. If we lose a spirit of critical enquiry, even about Darwinism, we dishonour the pursuit of science.

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