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Rescuing Darwin

Considering the attention, if not outright adulation, that Charles Darwin is receiving during the year of his double anniversary (Birth: 1809; *The Origin of Species*, 1859), one might not imagine that Darwin requires ‘rescuing’. The problem of course, as Edward Larson mentions in his review article in this Issue, is that Darwin has been recruited over these past 150 years in attempts to support a huge range of ideologies, many of them mutually exclusive, including capitalism, socialism, theism, atheism, feminism, eugenics, militarism and racism. As George Bernard Shaw once sardonically remarked: Darwin ‘had the luck to please everybody who had an axe to grind’. So the challenge today is to celebrate Darwin not as the icon of some particular ideology, but simply as the great natural historian that he undoubtedly was.

That task is not made any easier by the on-going portrayal of Darwinian evolution as a rallying cry for atheism on the part of the ‘New Atheists’, and the continued vilification of Darwin by millions of creationists for precisely the same reason. The great irony is that both the extreme poles are in such unity when it comes to their assessment of Darwin, whereas Darwin himself consistently refused to be recruited to such extremes. ‘It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist’, wrote Darwin to John Fordyce in 1879. ‘In my most extreme fluctuations,’ he continued, ‘I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God.’ ‘Why should you be so aggressive?’ Darwin asked the atheist Edward Aveling, shortly before he died. ‘Is anything gained by trying to force these new ideas upon the mass of mankind?’ Misguided attempts to recruit evolution in support of atheism are nothing new.

So how can we encourage the celebration of Darwin without all the ideological trappings? A plethora of books and articles continue to pour off the press critiquing the portrayal of evolution as a ‘universal acid’ (to use Daniel Dennett’s phrase) that will inevitably subvert ideas of human identity and value. Later this year a book entitled *Biology and Ideology – from Descartes to Dawkins* will be published by Chicago University Press, illustrating the many ways in which biology has been used and abused for non-biological purposes since 1600. At a more popular level, the report entitled *Rescuing Darwin* (www.theosthinktank.co.uk) maps out in greater detail the message of this Editorial. The report reveals that around a quarter of the British population are committed in their adherence to Young Earth Creationism or Intelligent Design, and a further quarter are doubtful about evolution. Scientists located in faith communities hostile to evolution face the significant challenge of helping to rescue Darwin the scientist from his distorted portrayal as a threat to good theology.