

America is caught in a conflict between science and God

A new exhibition on Darwin's life and work is a defiant gesture against US biblical literalism

Martin Kettle

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It isn't very often that a mere visit to an exhibition counts as a political act, but that's certainly how it feels these days as you mount the steps of the American Museum of Natural History, overlooking Central Park. Admittedly, there wasn't a protester in sight when I visited this week, and staff have not yet faced picket lines or hate mail. This is, after all, New York City not Salt Lake City. But organisers of the museum's terrific new exhibition on the life and work of Charles Darwin acknowledge that theirs is an explicit gesture of defiance towards an anti-scientific Christian fundamentalism that is again running fast and deep in contemporary America.

New York's Darwin exhibition - which will reach London for the Darwin bicentenary in 2009 - is a model of its kind. It takes you comprehensively and fascinatingly through the great scientist's life story. But it is the exhibition's deeper message that matters most in modern America. It asserts without shame, fear or compromise that Darwin's theory of evolution is, quite simply, true. In other modern democracies this is an uncontroversial statement. In modern America it is an act not without bravery. That is why, for instance, corporate sponsors have run a mile from a £1.7m event that elsewhere would have them queueing up for the privilege. It is why this exhibition - unlike, say, the Fra Angelico show on the other side of the park at the Metropolitan Museum of Art - is reported on the news pages of US papers as well as the arts and leisure pages. It is why Newsweek magazine's US edition this week has Darwin's picture on the front cover, while Newsweek's international edition, addressing a more relaxed readership perhaps, opts for a cover on John Lennon.

Reflect on this. Only one out of four Americans believes life on earth today has evolved through natural selection. Three-quarters of Americans, in other words, still do not accept what Darwin established 150 years ago. Just under half of all Americans believe the natural world was created in its present form by God in six days as described in Genesis. They believe, incredibly, that the earth is only a few thousand years old.

But these people are not content to disagree with Darwin and the scientists. They are up for a fresh fight with them. The notion that the scientists had won the argument in America after the reaction to the Scopes trial 80 years ago, when a Tennessee teacher was convicted of breaching a state ban on the teaching of evolution, has faced many reality checks in recent years. School boards and education authorities in several parts of America have mounted a series of anti-evolution challenges. These have often come under the guise of putting "intelligent design" - the conceit that the complexity of the natural world can only be explained by the intercession of a supreme being - on a par with evolutionary theory. This claim, advanced on spurious grounds of fairness to different theories, is utterly without any scientific validity, yet a Pennsylvania court will rule on the matter early in the new year.

In the 15 years since it surfaced as the strategy of choice for a new generation of biblical literalists, intelligent design has had an incredibly soft ride into many parts of American public life. When he was running for president in 1999, George Bush gave the idea his blessing in an interview, saying that he favoured the teaching of "different schools of thought" and adding: "I mean, after all, religion has been around a lot longer than Darwinism ... I believe God did create the world. And I think we're finding out more and more and more as to how

it actually happened." Bush has avoided the issue since then, but the anti-evolution campaign has plenty of momentum of its own now. Since 9/11 you often hear the argument that the liberal western world must study and learn more about Islam in order to better comprehend the fundamentalist Muslim mind. Maybe so. But you do not often hear people advocating similar inquisitiveness about the fundamentalist Christian mind. Perhaps that too ought to change, especially if we want to understand an America in which religious feeling is growing, not shrinking, and in which the outriders are becoming more audacious intellectually and politically by the day.

I challenge any British visitor to go into a good American bookshop and not be amazed at the scale and subject matter of the religious books on display. A few blocks from the Darwin exhibition, there is a Barnes & Noble bookshop where there are shelves and shelves of the stuff - Bibles in profusion, yards of Judaica, vast tomes about Mormonism, apparently serious volumes about Oprah Winfrey's spiritual significance in modern America. Particularly fascinating is the Religious Fiction section. Believe me, we're not talking CS Lewis here. Check out the biggest shelf presence of the lot, the Left Behind series of novels by "prophecy scholar" Tim LaHaye with Jerry B Jenkins - 60m volumes sold so far - and you will get an inkling of the intensity of the apocalyptic "holy living in an unholy age" crusade against science in modern America.

One of the best bits in Christopher Meyer's memoirs comes when he relates how, as British ambassador to the US, he always made a point of stressing that America is a profoundly foreign country not a larger and more powerful version of Britain. Of course, as with all generalisations about the US, the reality is more complex and subtle. As recent presidential elections have shown, America is a divided country not a homogeneous one. But Meyer's point is right even so. We live in a world dominated by the United States. The US claims and asserts military and economic -and moral - primacy in that world. And yet, not least in the estimation of many of its people, the US is not like the rest of the world. In their eyes, it is a special place whose specialness is part, and even proof, of a divine purpose. It is but a small step from there to say that divine claims should take precedence over science, and rhetoric over reason.

Is America a nation in the vanguard of the modern world? Or is it also a nation in revolt against the modern world? One thing is clear: America will not resolve this dilemma until it is more honest and courageous with itself about science and religion than many Americans are today. Against the onrush of this madness, the Darwin exhibition in New York attempts to draw a line. Perhaps we should see it as part of a wider fightback against the recent hijacking of America that can also be seen in the renewed energy of the US domestic argument about Iraq. Either way, it surely deserves a global cheer.

martin.kettle@...