Writing in The New Republic, Harvard entomologist Edward O Wilson pleads with Christian America to make common cause with him in saving the natural world. It's not a bad idea. But Wilson wants God's people to know that he considers this to be a big ask: "It may seem far-fetched for a secular scientist to propose an alliance between science and religion," he says.

To many it may indeed: the rivalry between science and theology goes back centuries, of course, and the current climate of fear about fundamentalist religion will do nothing to lessen sales of Richard Dawkins' latest attack on Him Upstairs or the resulting ire of believers. But the alliance Wilson proposes doesn't seem very far-fetched to me. In fact it confirms that those of us not blinded by the over-mighty creed of sociobiology - the one Dawkins, Wilson and a host of others evangelise relentlessly - need to raise up our voices more stridently.

What is sociobiology? To its high priests and adherents it is the academic discipline that answers most completely big questions about human conduct and society. Why do people differ in temperament, aptitudes and behaviours? What explains sexual attraction? How can we account for our species's social and moral organisation and for the reasons they break down?

The answers, according to sociobiology, lie pre-eminently in a human nature formed by millennia of evolution and carried forward by the transmission of genes. For sociobiologists the gene is bedrock, the key to the mysteries of all that we feel, crave and believe; in our genes lie the secrets of what we call our "nature". It is a view of humankind in which all other factors are contingent and secondary.

Edward Wilson is widely seen as the granddaddy of sociobiology since his book of that title was published in 1975. Despite fierce criticism of it from other evolutionary biologists such as the late Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, Wilson's book has been followed by a great slew of popular scientific literature, the rise and rise of university courses in evolutionary psychology and the ubiquity in everyday conversation of "Darwinian" or "genetic" or "hormonal" reasons offered for just about everything from a taste for landscape paintings to Why Men Don't Iron.

For the record, I'm not a creationist or an adherent to any religion and I'll take science over superstition anytime. Yet I have a low opinion of all sociobiology, including evolutionary psychology and all its other associates. I dislike the reductionism Dawkins relies on and defends because it ends up obscuring more about its subject - us - than it reveals. I consider its intellectual basis conservative with a small "c" (and a big one occasionally), its research methods to be of questionable validity and its interpretations of its findings restricted to those which uphold the premise the research was supposedly designed to test.

And there's another thing. Sociobiology proselytises an account of the social and natural world which, as Wilson explains, sees itself as the antithesis of religion's. Yet as the late Professor Dorothy Nelkin noted here:

"Scientists promoting genetic explanations use a language replete with religious metaphors and concepts such as immortality and essentialism - indeed, the gene appears to be a kind of sacred 'soul'. And as missionaries bringing truth to the unenlightened, they claim their theories are guides to moral action and policy agendas."
Sociobiologists often see themselves as prophets battling to make unbelievers see the light. Hence Steven Pinker, who has written a whole book insisting that we are in "modern denial" about human nature and the sovereign power of our genetic "hard-wiring" over who we are and will ever be.

In denial? I don't think so! Walk into any bookshop, read any rightwing newspaper, listen to everyday conversations and soon discover that far from being in denial about human nature as Pinker defines it, our culture is enthralled and beguiled by the claims made by sociobiology. The story it tells presses a mystical distillate of rarefied expertise into the service of a neat, linear, and often "sexy" narrative, especially when it's about what EP-ers term "mating strategies". Journalists, sometimes intimidated by such apparently high-powered knowledge, re-tell the story uncritically. Those who contest it are not called on to speak. The public gulps it down hungrily.

Why should this be? Why such ready acceptance of a body of theory that insists that biology places strict limits on human potential in an era when humans breach such limits with a regularity that most of us would have thought prohibited by nature only a few decades ago?

Could it be because sociobiology inserts into the zeitgeist comforting certainties about humanity, which meet a social need in these times of rapid change and often frightening uncertainty? A need to cling to new assertions of ancient verities? A need rather similar to that also met by ... well, religion?