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Incorporating Science News Letter

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COVER: A new technique called X-ray lithography can produce finely etched patterns in metal, like the magnetic bubble circuit shown here. The X-rays can also be used to reveal the minute internal structure of samples of living tissue. The techniques, developed by the Research Division of IBM, have several advantages over comparable electron-beam techniques. See p. 173. (Photo: IBM)

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MARCH 12, 1977

LETTERS

Evolution vs. creationism: The response

The reader response to a recent brief news article "Scientists Answer the Creationists" (SN: 2/5/77, p. 85) poses problems for our small letters section. I want to share the situation with you. The main problem is volume: There are enough letters to fill six weeks' worth of these columns. Our article was less than 500 words—about what, given other demands on our limited space, I felt the subject was worth. There are other problems as well. Feelings run very strong on this issue. Many of the letters state strong personal beliefs. That is fine; we all have our beliefs. Few of the letters, however, add any new factual information to the debate. Furthermore, even to our nonexpert eyes, many of the letters seem to us to distort the facts that are available on the subject of evolution. Publishing these uncritically would require rejoinders from others attempting to set the record straight and result in an endless round of communications. Even if we had that kind of space, which we don't, I'm not sure anything would be gained. It's a classic "more heat than light" controversy.

In the interests of fairness, however, I offer this summary of the response:

The overwhelming majority of the letters were critical of the statement, signed by 179 scientists, educators and religious leaders, upholding evolution as a widely held scientific principle. Of 27 letters received, 24 were critical. Of the three that were not, only one expressly stated support for the statement. It is well known that statements of this sort elicit response mainly from those with contrary views, while those in agreement see no need to acknowledge their assent, so the ratio is perhaps not entirely surprising.

A number of the letter writers identified themselves as members of the creationist movement; others made no such mention.

The criticisms ranged all the way from good-natured chiding of the statement's authors over particular phrases to intensely stated procreationist, antievolution assertions.

On the mild side, one of the common complaints (voiced by many) concerned the implication in the title of our article that no scientists are creationists. (One reader provided names of nine scientists who are, and

several of the writers said they were scientists.) Other frequently voiced complaints concerned the statement's contention that no "competent" biologist takes any nonevolutionary principle seriously, thereby defining competency in terms of agreement with the signers' views, and the contention that "no alternative theories" to evolution are taken seriously, considered by many respondents to be unwisely absolutist.

On the other extreme were assertions that evolution itself is based totally on faith. "Evolutionists typically argue by elitist appeal to authority," said one writer. "Evolution as a theory is based completely on a priori and circular reasoning without any concrete foundation," claimed another. Said a third: "The monkey theory of evolution is only one of the five (or more) theories. . . . Faith in these theories is really a form of religion."

Others contend that the fossil record is inadequate to support evolution. "Prove that the scale of reptiles evolved into the bird feathers that have such amazing morphology" demands one. "The fossil record presents abundant evidence which supports the creation model, but there is yet no certain evidence to support evolution," claims another.

Still others portrayed the matter as an attempt to suppress freedom and/or religious truth. ". . . mindless, discourteous . . . obnoxious brand of reversed persecution," was one characterization. "Reminds me of the persecutions during Copernicus's time," was another. "Anyone trying to shut people off from an idea is just plain scared of that particular idea," said another.

This gives some idea of the range of responses. But there is no way in our limited space to give a full picture of either their content or flavor. Much could be added here in the way of information or comment. For now we'll forego that temptation.

—Kendrick Frazier

A mental tapestry

Anthropology is far from being my *raison d'être*. So it was with some reluctance that I turned to "Unraveling a Mayan Mystery" (SN: 1/29/77, p. 74). Yet, by the end of the article, the weaving of geo- and anthropologic facts turned to a mental tapestry.

Anytime facts pointedly related to one investigation mesh fluidly with several distinct disciplines, generally unconnected chords within my mind are together struck. The novel resonance asserts itself in passing and refreshes.

Continue the fine reporting.

Walt James
Madison, Wis.

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