

Cashing in on the unknown

THERE is an occupational hazard suffered by scientific editors — the receipt of unsolicited manuscripts claiming to prove that Einstein or Darwin got it all wrong and proudly announcing the solution to the riddle of the universe.

The archetype of this genre must surely be Erich von Daniken's 'Chariots of the Gods'. Here was a persuasive advocate assembling a series of unrelated phenomena into a case for aliens having visited Earth.

What is rare indeed is for someone with genuine scientific credentials to tread this selfsame path. When professional scientists claim to have reached conclusions 'derived from known, experimentally and observationally tested properties of the Universe', then they must expect to be judged by the normal criteria of the scientific world.

From the discovery that interstellar dust contains simple compounds of carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen and oxygen, Fred Hoyle and his colleague Chandra Wickramasinghe have promoted the notion that 'cells in the form of freeze-dried bacteria are prevalent everywhere in the galaxy'. The latest version, Cosmic Life-Force, is published by Dent at £12.95.

Diseases such as Aids have supposedly come from space and reached the surface of

REACTIONS

BEVERLY HALSTEAD
reviews Fred Hoyle's
attempt to prove there
is a cosmic life-force.

the Earth in rain, and entered man through skin lesions.

'Flu attacks entire populations directly from space. The major events in the history of life, such as the radiation of mammals after the demise of the dinosaurs, are attributed to genetic storms from space.

Of course, the real problem is Darwin. The whole book is aimed at refuting Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, and

convincing the reader that the authors' 'rational endeavours as scientists' lead to the logical need for intelligence and purpose in the Universe, consistent with the tenets of the major religions of the world.

It is difficult to know how to tackle the studied myopia of the authors. The waters of the oceans from comets? No mention of, let alone attempt at, refutation of the generally held view that the source was volcanic activity.

I consider Cosmic Life-Force to be a picturesque and shabby book. It seriously misleads the reader by its crudely biased selection of data. Even if the ideas had any merit, the methods used to communicate them would still have earned the authors the well-deserved contempt of their erstwhile colleagues.

It is all so sad and unnecessary. In 1957 Fred Hoyle published a wonderful science fiction story, 'The Black Cloud,' which covered much the same ground. Hoyle wrote, 'I hope that my scientific colleagues will enjoy this frolic.'

Well, we did enjoy it immensely. It is tragic and saddening that this theme should now have been translated into such portentous pseudoscientific nonsense.

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