The English Methodist Response to Darwin

by E. Brooks Holifield

Charles Darwin expected to sell slightly more than one thousand copies of *The Origin of Species*. When it was published in 1859, the entire first edition of 1250 copies was sold in one day, and the book became the object of a seemingly interminable controversy among scientists, journalists, philosophers, and clergymen. The most widely publicized, though not the most dignified, clash in the early debate between clergymen and scientists came in June, 1860, when the Anglican Bishop Samuel Wilberforce concluded an impassioned, satirical oration before the British Association by inquiring whether it was "through his grandfather or his grandmother" that his opponent "claimed his descent from a monkey." The opponent was Thomas Huxley, who replied with an address that was so solemn and restrained, and yet so intense, that a feminine observer celebrated his peroration by fainting.¹

Descriptions of religious responses to Darwin have frequently tended to blur the distinction between English clergymen and fainting women. The reaction of churchmen has been described as "immediate," "vocal," and "violent."² I wish to suggest, however, that the predominant ecclesiastical response was neither so feverish and intemperate nor so uniform as the Wilberforce speech might imply. Many nineteenth century Methodists, at any rate, were surprisingly indifferent to the issue; others supported Darwin, though not without certain reservations. I also propose to argue that those reservations reveal one of the characteristic preoccupations of late nineteenth century English Methodists. They were, it seems, determined above all else to safeguard the dignity of man, particularly his capacity for moral agency. If the Darwinian debates are any accurate indication, at least, Victorian Methodists had developed by the latter part of the century a remarkably anthropocentric theological orientation.

I. The Character of the Response

It is notable, first, that the English Methodist intellectual journals failed to find in Darwin any cause for immediate alarm. *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* printed a major critical discussion of *The Origin of Species* in 1861, describing the book as a "confused and fallacious essay" by an "honest and learned man," but the *Review* had little else to say about Darwin until 1875, when it printed a brief discussion of *The Descent of Man.*³ The Wesleyan-

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Methodist Magazine contained nothing whatsoever about him until June, 1861, and then the reader was simply referred in a footnote to an article in the 1860 Quarterly Review, in which Bishop Wilberforce had shown Darwinism to be "wholly untenable, and opposed to the spirit of inductive philosophy." Although almost every issue of The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine had an article on the recent progress of science, no further allusion to Darwin appeared until 1868, when Charles Lyell was criticized for going "too far with Darwinism and the development theory." The Magazine printed no full-length treatment of Darwin's ideas until 1882.

There were, in addition, still other indications that while Darwin disturbed the British Methodists, he did not precipitate any immediate theological crisis among them. The reports of the Methodist Conferences in London regularly contained polemical animadversions against rationalism, Roman Catholicism, and "the literature of unbelief." Not until 1873, however, did the conference minutes even mention "the heresies of science." During the early years of the controversy, moreover, one could read a weekly church paper, designed to reflect the interests of the average British Methodist, without ever becoming aware of Darwin's existence. The Methodist Recorder, founded in 1861 at the very height of the initial debates, ignored Darwin entirely for three years. It broke its silence only in February, 1864, with a brief, unobtrusive report from the Hackney Road Wesleyan Chapel Mutual Improvement Society to the effect that the Reverend G. T. Perks, who would soon become Secretary of the Missionary Society and later rise to the Presidency of the Conference, had refuted Darwin in the course of an entertaining lecture on "The Theology of Geology." Thereafter the paper lapsed once more into an extended period of indifferent disregard for the issue.

The silence of segments of the weekly ecclesiastical press was apparently typical also of many—probably most—British pulpits, whether Methodist or Anglican. A large company of parish ministers were simply indifferent to the whole scientific enterprise. In three hundred twenty-five sermons published in The Penny Pulpit from 1859 to 1871, for example, there was only one allusion to Darwin or to evolution. One Archibald Boyd assured his readers in 1862 that God had made "no provision whatever for transmuta-

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7 Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, xvii (London, 1869), p. 36.
9 The Methodist Recorder, February 12, 1864. Cited hereafter as MR.
tion of species."

The princes of the *Penny Pulpit*, who never hesitated to attack heretics or to preach on topical issues, ignored Darwin. And in similar sermons printed weekly in the *Methodist Recorder*, references to Darwin were equally sparse throughout the entire first decade of the controversy. Methodist parish ministers sometimes exhibited a sublime disinclination to debate evolution even when confronted with provocative challenges. In 1871 the *Recorder* printed a letter from a Cambridge biology student criticizing the paper for its assumption that natural selection was a dead issue. At a time when zealous readers occasionally engaged one another for months in the epistolary columns of the weekly papers, the student’s comments evoked one solitary reply. John Moore, a Wesleyan minister from Stamford-place, near Manchester, informed him that natural selection was “philosophically absurd.”

As if to demonstrate the paper’s suggestion that natural selection was an irrelevant relic of the history of science, the remaining subscribers ignored the exchange altogether. They were far more interested, after 1861 at least, in the debates over Biblical criticism that were shaking the Anglican establishment.

II. The Dignity of Man

Darwin’s publications did, of course, disturb many English churchmen, and Methodists could not perpetually ignore the issues that he raised. Nurtured on a long tradition of natural theology, many English Christians felt compelled to come to terms with his description of the physical world. But precisely why were they disturbed?

Some interpreters of the Victorian period suggest that the apparent banishment of the idea of God as creator and designer caused most of the offence; others imply that the real question emerged from the threat to the traditional conception of man’s place in nature. Certainly no English churchman who wrote about Darwinism limited his discussion to its implications for one isolated doctrine.

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11 MR, August 15, 1871; August 18, 1871.

12 Richard Church informed an American friend that Anglicans, too, turned their attention from Darwin to Biblical Criticism after the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1861 and Bishop Colenso’s studies of the Pentateuch in 1862. Mary B. Church (ed.), *Life and Letters of Dean Church* (London, 1894), pp. 154-157. For examples of Methodist interest in the debate over Biblical studies, see MR, July 3, 1862; October 9, 1862; December 4, 1862; December 6, 1863; February 6, 1863; February 20, 1863; March 6, 1863; April 17, 1863; January 1, 1864; February 12, 1864; December 9, 1864; December 30, 1864; and subsequent issues. The absence of similar references to Darwin is revealing.


But it seems quite clear that the primary Methodist concern was indeed the dignity of man.

Some English ecclesiastics persistently maintained, for example, that the danger of Darwinism was its implicit atheism, but the more sophisticated of the Methodist intellectual leaders, at least, were eventually able to adapt their conception of God to the new scientific discoveries. Though some Methodists feared that “the current scientific speculation” led to “the elimination from man’s world of a living and ever-working personal God,” others replied that it was inaccurate and unfair to equate Darwinism and Atheism.\(^{15}\) By 1880, W. H. Dallinger, the author of the scientific sections of the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, was advancing in Methodist circles a new teleological argument for the existence of God by appealing to the Darwinian description of adaption in animal forms. This “new teleology,” based in part on the new science, “would be as much richer and more sublime, than the older, as the facts are more marvellous.”\(^{16}\) Such evolutionary teleology, which was also popular among Anglican Broad Churchmen, acquired a respected place in late nineteenth century Methodist theology.\(^{17}\)

It was also relatively easy for Methodists to harmonize their conceptions of Scripture with the new science. Few of them took very seriously the Darwinian challenge to the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy. This was not because they were particularly open to Biblical criticism, but because most apparently agreed at the outset that “the testimony of the Most High in the Book of Nature and his testimony in the Book of Revelation can never be mutually inconsistent; and whatever discrepancies may for the moment exist, increasing light and advancing knowledge will most assuredly bring about their reconciliation.”\(^{18}\) They believed that the threat to traditional views of Scriptural authority came from the Anglican Biblical critics, not from Darwin. Indeed, they took comfort in the hope that the sciences of geology and biology, so “recent and unformed,” might yet actually corroborate the chronology of creation in Genesis if given sufficient time.\(^{19}\) Consequently, the Biblical


\(^{18}\) *MR*, September 23, 1864.

issue appeared very infrequently in Methodist discussions of Darwin.

In so far as Methodists were seriously disturbed by Darwinism, the main source of their disquietude was its anthropological implications. On this issue there was no retreat. With remarkable unanimity, Methodists accused Darwin of impugning the dignity of man. Insisting that mankind was a unique product of divine creation, they rarely hesitated to remind the skeptic that “all investigation hitherto has failed to show any gradation leading from man downwards.”

In 1871, James H. Rigg, the Principal of the Methodists’ Westminster Training Institution in London, delivered to the Christian Evidence Society an address that received widespread attention within English Methodism. Rigg defined himself as a respectful student and admirer of Darwin’s scientific accomplishment, but he inserted a demurrer on behalf of mankind: “To me it appears that the sense of personality is an altogether new and original fact, one which cannot be conceived as developed out of any pre-existing phenomena or conditions.” This was the persistent Methodist theme. Methodists were on occasion willing to go to great lengths to protect the uniqueness of man. William Spiers, a young minister at Westminster in London, tried to preserve human distinctiveness with the proposal that mankind, having sinned, degenerated into apedom and then evolved again. Biologists who purported to exhibit evidence for the existence of man’s ape-like predecessors had simply discovered the traces of fallen humanity. Another correspondent rejoiced in 1880 that “the derivation of man from some lower animal, all but fanatical evoluntionists have given up.” Having preserved man’s uniqueness, he could then assure his readers that there was nothing in any evolutionary hypothesis to disturb the faithful.

W. H. Dallinger, who finally accepted most of the Darwinian hypothesis, and easily adapted to it his conception of God and Scripture, continued to affirm that “man’s development from lower forms is nowhere indicated in nature,” and he insisted that even if man had, as a physical creature, developed gradually from lower forms, “the moral and spiritual properties of his personality” were surely imparted directly and immediately by God. In a widely circulated sermon preached at Green-lanes Chapel in 1877, Dallinger introduced his concern into the pulpit. The sermon dealt broadly with the theological implications of biological evolution,

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21 MR, May 26, 1871.
but the text, taken from First Corinthians, clearly foreshadowed Dallinger's primary intention: "the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (I Cor. 3:17). After defining evolution as the sublime progression of the divine will, Dallinger affirmed man as the apex of the process.

If we consider nature as the product, of which evolution was the one great factor and man its latest outcome, it yet remains the same—he crowns the universe.

There is no product elsewhere in all the universe like the soul of man. Bright as all that is material may be, it lacks the transcendent lustre of the mind.

Thus also, Dallinger's Fernley Lecture in 1887 at Wesley College in Sheffield, later published as The Creator, and what we may know of the Method of Creation, actually dealt more with the creature than the Creator. He announced his agreement with the essentials of the Darwinian thesis, but concluded the lecture by assuring his listeners that Darwinism left "unaltered our conviction of the dignity and majesty of man."

The sovereignty of man does not depend on a particular view of the exact manner in which the creator caused the elements of the earth to produce his frame.

No property of matter, he explained, could ever be sufficient reason for the mysterious ability of man to cry, "I can," "I ought," "I think."

To the nineteenth century Methodist, there was a special pertinence in Dallinger's allusions to obligation and moral ability. Methodist writers agonized particularly over the thought that Darwinism might undermine belief in man's capacity for moral agency. In 1875, a contributor to The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine delineated clearly the precise limits of compromise: "At the very vestibule of man's moral nature we take our stand, and affirm that the temple is sacred." It was revealing that the critic who wrote the initial Methodist response to Darwin in 1860 devoted most of his article to technical scientific criticism but concluded with a warning that evolutionary doctrine was dangerous because it raised the spectre of a "fixed inexorable law" determining the moral decisions of man. This, he said, would leave "no room for the responsibility of

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25 MR, May 1, 1877.
26 Dallinger, The Creator, and what we may know of the Method of Creation (London, 1887), pp. 79-80.
27 Ibid., p. 82.
the creature.” He wanted above all to preserve a conviction of human freedom.

Whether we are advanced to the throne of God, or thrust out from his presence, the award of law will be given, not because we had been bound upward by development to either fate, but because we had been free to choose between them; because the Son of God had interposed between man and his natural destiny, and given back to His creatures a renewed power of choice, by which, when His Spirit called, they might have followed Him and been free.29

When the London Quarterly Review discussed Darwin’s second major controversial work, The Descent of Man (1871), the Methodist reviewer disagreed only with the book’s suggestion that “conscience is a mere resultant of the spontaneous activities of the social instincts.”30 The conscience, after all, was the precondition of consistent decisions for the good, and without a unique conscience man would, it seemed, be merely an amoral automaton entirely immersed in nature. This vision was the main source of Methodist discomfiture. William Spiers reflected therefore the common view among Methodists when he firmly declined to consider man’s “consciousness of moral responsibility” as “nothing more than a physiological phenomenon.”31

William Burton Pope’s three volume systematic theology, first published in 1875, illustrated vividly the Methodists’ concerns about the dignity of man. Pope, a tutor at Didsbury College in Manchester and the most important Methodist theologian in England during the second half of the nineteenth century, confronted Darwin when he attempted to explicate the Christian doctrine of creation. He acknowledged that “no writings have done so much . . . to open men’s eyes to the infinite variety, and beauty, and wonderfulness of the adjustments of the vegetable and animal worlds” as the writings of evolutionary scientists. But Pope’s admiration for the evolutionists was qualified. When they tried to extend the explanatory power of their theories to “the growth of moral and spiritual sentiments,” he protested.

Science cannot allow time enough since the calculated beginning of the solar system; and Religion protests in the name of God, and for the honour of His incarnate Son, and for the dignity of man himself, the descendent of Adam, which was the Son of God.32

And it did not take long for Pope to betray a special concern about “the descendent of Adam.” His main objection to evolution was its

32 Pope, Compendium, I, 405.
tendency to degrade "the integrity of the higher element in man's nature." That was, he thought, an unfitting denigration of the creature who occupied "the noblest and most ample section in the history of creation as revealed in Scripture." When he was forced to confront the biological evidence for evolution, Pope repeated the familiar suggestion that the ape-like remains discovered by the scientists might represent "a descent from man's original created glory." 33

Two concluding comments are appropriate. First, if in retrospect it seems that nineteenth century English Methodist intellectual leaders were rightly subject to criticism for the character of their response to Darwin, this was not because they responded intemperately, vocally, and violently, but because so many of them, unlike the Anglican Broad Churchmen, neglected him for so long, failing to perceive the immense importance of his work.34 But this shortsightedness, one might add, they shared with the bulk of the English scientific community, which, as Darwin himself expected, furnished the main opposition to his theories.35 By the end of the nineteenth century, moreover, Methodist theological leadership had generally accepted the findings of the evolutionary biologists. One thinks not only of a scientifically sophisticated clergyman like W. H. Dallinger, but also of influential church administrators, such as Percy W. Bunting, editor of the Methodist Times during the nineties, who evoked a uniformly favorable response when he affirmed the theory of evolution in an address to the Ecumenical Conference of 1891.36

Second, the Methodists' anxiety about the moral dignity of man requires some comment. Robert Chiles has documented a transition in American Methodist theology from "free grace to free will" that entailed an ever-increasing emphasis on the moral capacities of man.37 It is quite apparent that many English Methodists were moving in a similar direction, as evidenced by their feeling especially compelled to protect the moral potential of mankind against the threat of Darwinism. Their attempt was faintly reminiscent of

33 Ibid., pp. 421, 431, 432.
the eighteenth century Methodist concern to defend the integrity of the will against the Calvinists, but there were important differences. Wesley feared that Calvin had slandered the benevolent mercy of God; the Victorian Methodists feared that Darwin had defamed the moral character of man. The Methodist response to Darwin revealed an anthropocentric tendency that reflected the preoccupations of the broader nineteenth century Victorian culture. As if to substantiate such a judgment, William Burton Pope argued explicitly in 1875 that man was "in a certain sense the centre of this science" of theology, the "object around which all revolves." "How great is the dignity of man that he is the centre, in any sense, of such a science." And how great Pope's anxiety, therefore, and that of his fellow Methodists, lest this honored position be compromised by "the chaos of modern anthropology." 38

38 Pope, Compendium, I, 5-6, 9, 148.