Methodists are not often among the religious groups cited in studies of the impact of evolutionary theory on nineteenth-century American Christianity. Bert James Loewenberg’s and Stow Persons’ important studies fail to comment on the Methodists as does Herbert Hovenkamp’s study of pre-Darwinian science and religion in America. In what is one of the most comprehensive recent accounts of evolution’s impact on Protestantism, James R. Moore’s only explicit comment on American Methodists is his acceptance of the generalization that the Methodists were “reluctant but generally uninvolved” in the acceptance of evolution.1 One notable exception to these studies is Jon H. Roberts’ recent Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859-1900.2 Roberts includes Methodist writers among the many Protestant intellectuals he cites in his excellent study. But he does not look at the Methodist contribution in its own light.

Though not the most vocal denomination in the discussion, Methodists were quite aware of the new scientific theory. Indeed, a lively discussion of the character of evolution and its implications for Christian faith can be found in the pages of the Methodist Quarterly Review (MQR), the official theological journal of the Methodist Episcopal Church. An examination of that journal shows not only that its editors and contributors thoughtfully engaged the issue of evolution at its earliest appearance, but that within a decade of the publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species they had found a way to reconcile evolution with the Gospel.3


3 The Methodist Quarterly Review underwent three title changes during its history. From 1818-1828 it was known as the Methodist Magazine; from 1830-1840, the Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review (hereafter cited as MMQR); from 1841-1884, the Methodist Quarterly Review (hereafter, MQR); and from 1885-1931, the Methodist Review (hereafter, MR). For convenience I shall refer to the publication in the text by the abbreviation (MQR) of its best known title, The Methodist Quarterly Review, though I shall preserve in the notes the abbreviated title appropriate to the cited volume. For a brief history of the journal and its relation to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, see James Mudge, “Seventy-Five Years of the 'Methodist Review,'” MR 76 (1894): 513-33.
Pre-Darwinian Science

The intellectual changes that culminated in Darwin's theory of evolution were already well underway in the decades prior to the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The view that the universe was but six thousand years old was challenged in those years and the reconciliation of findings from the new field of geology with the Genesis account of creation was a hotly debated topic.  

As early as 1838 there appeared in the *MQR* an article by William H. Allen in which he compared the current conflict between geology and scripture to the earlier conflict between Galileo and the church. Both conflicts should teach us, he said, "the folly of arranging a preconceived construction of language in opposition to the established truths of science." The "preconceived construction of language" to which Allen referred was the notion that the universe came about some 6,000 years ago in seven solar days. Geology, said Allen, clearly shows the earth to be older—much older. Rather than reject that the seven days described in Genesis were literal days, Allen and other Methodist writers of this period reinterpreted the opening verse of Genesis so as to allow that the earth was already long present when the narrative begins. Thus, "the fossiliferous rocks of the geologist were deposited during periods antecedent to the 'beginning,' mentioned in the Mosaic record, and hence cannot present facts in conflict with those given in the Scriptures." By the 1850s many contributors to the *MQR* had accepted the interpretive changes necessary to reconcile the very ancient earth hypothesized in geology with the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1.

---

7By 1867 the *Review* had editorially endorsed a fully symbolical interpretation of Genesis 1. "The Mosaic cosmogony is unhistorical, rhythmical, symbolic," says Daniel Whedon (Review of *Notes, Critical and Explanatory, On the Book of Genesis*, by M. W. Jacobus, *MQR* 49 [1867]: 307). Yet throughout his editorship Whedon maintained the literal historicity of Genesis 2 and 3, because he believed that anything less than a real historical fall of a real man Adam would impugn the soteriological scheme of Christianity. (See his review of *Genesis and its Authorship*, by John Quarry, *MQR* 49 [1867]: 297-304.) Whedon reiterates this position in an 1883 review of *The Theories of Darwin, and Their Relation to Philosophy, Religion, and Morality*, by Rudolf Schmid, *MQR* 65 (1883): 582-88. Not until after Whedon retires in 1884 does the *Review* begin to propose that the whole of the creation narrative in Genesis 1-3 is symbolical. (See, for example, the review of *The Permanent Value of the Book of Genesis as an Integral Part of the Christian Revelation*, by C. W. E. Body, *MR* [1895]: 665-66.)
The notion of evolution, or as it was called in mid-century, "the development hypothesis," also received attention prior to 1850. In 1844, Robert Chambers anonymously published his *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, combining the cosmological developmentalism of the nebular hypothesis, first proposed by the French mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon de Laplace, with the biological developmentalism of Jean Baptiste Lamarck. The result was a treatise that challenged not only the biblical account of creation and the dominant Paleyan theism underlying early nineteenth-century English and American Christianity, but also the dominant static essentialism underlying early nineteenth-century science. That challenge, combined with Chambers' careless use of evidence, made *Vestiges* a much maligned and ridiculed book in the 1840s, a fact that prejudiced the initial reactions to the later more thoughtful presentations of evolution such as Darwin's. 8

The *MQR* carefully reviewed *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* and its 1846 sequel, *Explanations*. 9 The anonymous reviewer raised questions concerning the development hypothesis that exemplify the criticism that this theory received over the next decades. Though he thought the theory set out in *Vestiges* entailed a materialism that "banishes God from his own universe, makes man an electro-chemical machine, annihilates all moral distinctions, and destroys the most consolatory of human hopes," and that the author's attempt to "drag in his passive Deity" is nothing more than an attempt to serve "a poisoned cup with a honeyed brim," 10 the main body of the review stood not on these theological issues, but on a scientific critique of Chambers' arguments. He divided those arguments into three areas for the sake of his critique: "cosmogony," in which he attacked the nebular hypothesis; "zoogony," in which he attacked Chambers' discussion of the origin of organic life by spontaneous generation; and "zoonomy," in which he attacked the theory of development by transmutation of species.

The last-named section was the *MQR* 's first discussion of organic evolution. The reviewer was quick to point out the credulity with which Chambers evaluated his evidence. For example, Chambers cited as experimental evidence a second-hand report that a field sown with oats, under certain conditions in which the gestation of the seed was "protracted,"

---


9 *MQR* 28 (1846): 282-327.

10 Ibid., 293, 295.
turned into a field of rye! Such anecdotal evidence was rightly questionable to the reviewer. But he also raised questions concerning more cogent parts of Chambers’ theory of transmutation of species, questions that anticipated the major scientific objections brought against Darwin’s later evolutionary theory. For instance, Chambers argued that the morphological similarity between the fetal stages of higher animals and the adult of lower was evidence for the genetic descent of species one from the other. But, the reviewer replied, this only means that “some parts of a mammal foetus of the highest order do bear some resemblance, in certain stages of their development, to corresponding parts of some of the inferior animals, at some stage of their development.” Chambers pointed to the wide variations obvious within species as suggesting that such variations could give rise to an entirely different species. But, said the reviewer, no single case of variation giving rise to another species has been documented. Moreover, “it would seem that nature has set up impassable barriers to prevent confusion of species, and that she guards their outposts with the eye of a watchful sentinel. The penalty for overstepping her landmarks is death; for she has denounced the annihilating curse of sterility upon unlawful progeny, and never fails to execute her malediction.” Other such scientific arguments were made by the reviewer. Since very few scientists, religious (as most were) or not, were convinced of transmutation of species by Chambers’ volumes, there was little need to deal more seriously at that date with his theory’s theological implications.

The Reaction to Darwin in the 1860s

After the review of Vestiges it was not until 1860 that evolution again received detailed attention in the MQR. The publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859 was the catalyst that set off renewed interest in the discussion.

On the Origin of Species was first examined by the Review in an 1860 book notice. The review was likely penned by Daniel Whedon, then editor of the journal. The spirit of this initial review was quite open compared to other religious journals’ initial reviews. Whedon read Darwin on Darwin’s own terms, not those previously set forth in Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation. Moreover, the argument was judged to be carefully presented and cogently argued. Indeed, Whedon saw that “the whole process seems to have been conducted in a philosophic spirit, with such prepossessions, indeed, as an allowable antecedent hypothesis would induce, and resulting in what can be only considered a debatable theory;

12Ibid., 323.
13Ibid., 326.
Evolution and Darwinism

sustained by a basis of innumerable facts and plausible reasonings; and a theory that challenges discussion and even adoption in absence of refutation or a preferable competitor." As positive as was Whedon about Darwin's "plausible reasonings," he, like most of his contemporaries, remained unconvinced of their probability. He examined Darwin's theory of natural selection and raised the same criticisms against it that one finds in most early scientific critiques of the book—the theory is false because hybrids are almost universally infertile, because the fossil evidence lacks the transitional forms projected by the theory, and because different species simply are not interested in mating with each other. What troubled many Christians about the book—that by arguing for a natural explanation Darwin had detracted from the miraculous special creation of species—did not trouble Whedon, for he recognized that Darwin's concession in the final paragraph of On the Origin of Species that the first primordial form of life from which all other life evolved, itself arose by special creation, entailed just as much, if not more, divine power than the special creation of each species. Indeed, for Whedon, "Mr. Darwin's miracle, though at first sight less objectively stupendous, is really a greater stroke of power, a more momentous interposition, than the organization of a new living fabric, . . . with a vitality already manifested on earth. Minuter as it may be, nay, invisible to this eye corporeal, it is immeasurable more a miracle to the eye of reason." This approach to evolution—arguing against it scientifically which showing that, if true, it does not necessarily contradict theism—becomes over the next three decades the editorial position of the MQR.

A longer review essay of The Origin of Species appeared the following year. Its author, W. C. Wilson, was less impressed than Whedon with Darwin's presentation and criticized it as being yet another version of "this old theory of the transmutation of species" nor "furnished with a new hat and stick." Wilson's catalog of objections included those raised by Whedon. In addition, he criticized Darwin's use of artificial selection as analogous to natural selection. That breeders are able to produce wide varieties of domesticated animals by artificial selection, said Wilson, does not mean that new species could arise naturally by the same mechanisms, for the varieties produced under domestication have to be intentionally maintained: "These distinct breeds or races are only produced by careful and constant selection by man of certain variable peculiarities, and by close breeding in and in. But let this perversion of nature be removed, and allow the different breeds to have free intercourse, and see how soon your boasted

---

15 Ibid., 336.
16 Ibid., 338.
18 Ibid., 607, 614.
varieties disappear.”¹⁹ Like Whedon, Wilson focused on scientific objections and raised virtually no theological objections to the theory. However, Wilson indicated why: “We have discussed this as a scientific question only, to be decided upon its merits without reference to its theological bearings. It will be time enough to consider it from this latter point of view when it appears likely to become established as a true scientific theory, of which there seems now to be but little need of apprehension.”²⁰ Wilson’s words were prophetic, for after evolution got a foothold in the scientific community, the discussion did indeed turn to the theological bearings of the theory.

In 1863, the MQR published an essay by Henry M. Harmon that did raise a theological objection.²¹ For Harmon, “the only form of infidelity from which Christianity has anything to fear is The Theory of Development,”²² because it challenged the argument for God’s existence that was during the nineteenth century so dominant, the argument from design. The argument, popularly presented in William Paley’s Natural Theology (1802) and exhaustively detailed in the several Bridgewater Treatises (1836-41), hinged on the idea that the adaptation of organisms to their environment requires an intelligent designer as its source. But Darwin’s theory of natural selection undercut the need for a designer. Harmon saw that “on this theory, that beautiful adaptation of means to ends, those exquisite contrivances that on every side strike the eye and fill us with wonder and admiration ... were not thus formed by a creative hand, but are merely the result of a long series of improvements in nature herself.”²³ Hence, insofar as Darwin’s theory of natural selection contradicts the argument from design, it must be rejected as “infidel.” Yet Harmon, too, believed that the scientific world would find Darwin’s version of the development theory as inadequate as its predecessors: “The author of the ‘Vestiges’ repudiates Lamarck’s hypothesis; Mr. Darwin rejects that of the ‘Vestiges,’ and his own will doubtless share the same fate.”²⁴

The Darwinian challenge to the argument from design did indeed become a point of contention for many Christians. Yet the position of the Review on this issue was moderate in tone. An editorial by Whedon appeared in the same volume as Harmon’s article, addressed not to Harmon but to a passage from Charles Martins’ “Organic Unity in Animals and Vegetables.”²⁵ Whedon object to Martins’ denial of final causality, or design, in nature. It is one thing for a scientist, said Whedon, to leave

¹⁹Ibid., 621.
²⁰Ibid., 627.
²¹Ibid., 183.
²²Ibid., 190.
²³Ibid., 196.
²⁴Ibid., 196.
²⁵MQR 45 (1863): 29-55.
final causality out of his description of material causality, but quite another
for him to claim that, in other areas such as philosophy and theology,
final causality can have no place. Moreover, in the course of his discussion,
Whedon argued that Darwin’s natural selection does not obviate the ques-
tion of design but moves it to a different level:

The true question is not, “Why do birds fly?” but, How came this complicated, con-
verging, and most exquisite adjustment of conditions by which birds are able to fly?
Nor does Mr. Darwin’s “natural selection” at all aid us here; for the question still
recurs, How came this most complex and yet most complete system, in which “natural
selection” has its chances of effective work? “Natural selection” operates with wonderful
success; but it must possess as truly wonderful a synthesis of principles, a framework
and system within which to work, as genius ever invented or art constructed.26

Thus, natural selection simply moves the question of design from the level
of individual specific adaptations to that of the system as a whole.27 It
does not require that theism be overturned—a point, as we have seen,
Whedon made in his initial review of *Origin of Species*.

**Whedon’s Reconciling Interpretation**

During the latter half of the 1860s, the *MQR’s* position on evolution
became clearly defined. In these years articles and reviews contained
references to Darwin’s hypothesis, usually in the context of the waxing
interest in biblical criticism that was also present at that time in the journal.
In the 1865 volume Tayler Lewis, whose earlier book *The Six Days of
Creation* (1855) had caused a heated exchange between himself and James
Dwight Dana on the proper interpretation of Genesis 1,28 further elucidated
his understanding of the proper interpretation of the Genesis creation
accounts by distinguishing between the *idea* of a biblical passage and the
*conception* in which that idea is presented.29 The idea of creation is not
necessarily tied to the conception of it as a series of overt outward physical
acts of God. Indeed, he argued that the idea of God’s creating through
the imposition of inward laws within the material world is a higher con-
ception of creation than is the more traditional notion that God, like an
artisan, forms things in an external, physical way:

Generic or specific generation is, in itself, no greater mystery, no further from or
nearer to the recognition of science, than individual generation, or one individual
life coming out of another. . . . It is [God’s] working, in either way. On proper
testimony we can believe one as well as the other, and there need be no fear about

---

27Whedon’s approach typifies the tendency among many nineteenth-century theists who wished
to preserve some version of the argument from design, to turn from utilitarian to idealist
versions of that argument. See Peter J. Bowler, “Darwinism and the Argument from Design:
28See above, n. 4.
its possibly linking us physically (although the Bible necessitates no such conclusion) with the animal races below us, as long as we believe aright in respect to our more divine spiritual origin.\textsuperscript{30}

Though Lewis was not himself a Methodist, his reconciling position on evolution and Genesis 1 was appropriated by Daniel Whedon.\textsuperscript{31} In 1867 the editor declared his interpretation that the Mosaic cosmogony in Genesis 1 is "unhistorical, rhythmic, symbolical."\textsuperscript{32} In that same volume the possibility of a reconciling interpretation of Genesis 2 was set forth in a review of S. W. Fullom's \textit{Mystery of the Soul}.\textsuperscript{33} Fullom suggested in his book that Genesis 2 narrates, not the creation \textit{ex nihilo} of the human, but the transition of the human from a lower animal, to a higher spiritual, form of being. Whedon built on Fullom's notion to suggest that Genesis 2:7 can be interpreted to mean that "after God had developed man to his completed bodily organism, it was by the divine inbreathing that he attained to his present position as a personal being, immortal as the breath that constitutes his nature." Thus, the lower animal nature of the human could have evolved without threat to the special spiritual creation of the human. By this means, Whedon saw a possible reconciliation between evolution and the Bible: "... if no scripture-believer need be a Darwinian, no Darwinian need necessarily reject Moses."\textsuperscript{34} This interpretation of Genesis 2:7 was reiterated in subsequent reviews as a way of reconciling evolution and the Bible,\textsuperscript{35} though Whedon himself remained unconvinced of the validity of the developmental hypothesis.\textsuperscript{36} In this we see

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, 219.

\textsuperscript{31} Whedon was much appreciative of Lewis's work and the two corresponded over the years. Lewis's significance to the Methodists is exemplified in the long tribute to him that appears in the \textit{Review}. William Wells, "Tayler Lewis: In Memoriam," \textit{MQR} 60 (1878): 604-31.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{MQR} 49 (1867): 307.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{MQR} 49 (1867): 143-44.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, 144.


\textsuperscript{36} Whedon more than ten years after these reviews maintains his creationist position. In an 1882 review of two books by Alexander Winchell, Whedon clearly stated his position against genetic derivation of species and for what he called "originative creation according to Plan and under law." Though by this time Whedon had accepted that species arose serially over a long reach of time, he believed that each species arose by God's special creation: "How much more natural than [genetic derivation] is the assumption that the comprehensive Power which founded the whole Plan, and inaugurated by immediate formative energy the commencement of life, here in due order of law, repeats its first act; and that in due series with future similar acts, so that the whole series is a one regular serial process, with nothing truly 'special,' or 'fiat,' or violative of law about it." Review of \textit{The Doctrine of Evolution} and \textit{Sparks from a Geologists's Hammer}, by Alexander Winchell, \textit{MQR} 64 (1882): 383-84.
how Wesleyan was the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. John Wesley, in describing the character of a Methodist, was clear as to the pluralism of opinion allowable among his followers: “But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”37 In these terms, the developmental hypothesis did not strike at “the root of Christianity” and was therefore a permissible belief. Even though the *Review* was not persuaded that the theory of evolution was scientifically valid, it devoted much attention in the 1860s to the apologetic task of showing that, were it true, it would not be antithetical to evangelical faith. In the *Review’s* own words: “Surely a route to the cross of Christ should be opened from every clime and every form of prevalent human thought where possible.”38