ALEXANDER WINCHELL'S "SCIENCE WITH A SOUL":
PIETY, PROFESSION, AND THE PERILS
OF 19TH CENTURY POPULAR SCIENCE

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In July of 1879, Methodist geologist and educator Alexander Winchell (1824-1891) began to record his professional accomplishments in a handwritten autobiography referred to as a "Lebenslauf" (career). Writing in the third person and from the perspective of what he imagined to be an admiring audience, Winchell noted that, "from early boyhood he apprehended the bearing of certain facts and conclusions of science upon points of Scripture and Christian faith. Holding firmly to the fundamental articles of Christian faith he has been drawn frequently into its defense by the facts and doctrines belonging in the field of science and philosophy." No northern Methodist had achieved such notoriety as a "popularizer of science," as he described himself, nor had anyone suffered so much persecution for attempting to reconcile science and religion in an era of "warfare."1

The image of a courageous martyr filled Winchell's mind as he interpreted the most recent and most cataclysmic turn of his career: his sudden expulsion from the newly founded Methodist school in Tennessee, Vanderbilt University. In response to his publicized views on human evolution in the press, as well as his increasing tendency to express those views before Methodist youth in Vanderbilt classrooms, Winchell crossed the line of fire in April and May 1878. In his diary, Winchell wrote bitterly of "old bigots," "medieval influences," and a local conspiracy by Methodist conservatives like Thomas O. Summers to discredit him and do him "serious injury."2 Over vast networks of religious and secular newspapers, Winchell's rhetoric sharpened as he publicized his frustrations over the growing polarization between "true" science and the church: "an arbitrary attack on my reputation constrained me to show that it was only the old bigotry, so natural to the Church, which had treated me so ungraciously." And furthermore, no church can "stifle my convictions nor silence my tongue," he declared.3 A year later, after receiving a letter of support from the distinguished American educator, Andrew Dickson

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1 Alexander Winchell, "Lebenslauf von Alexander Winchell," July 1879, Box 20, Alexander Winchell Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (hereafter cited as AWMHC), fols. 68, 72.
2 Winchell Diary, June 21, 1876 and March 31, 1878, Box 13, AWMHC.
3 "Prof. Winchell: His Reply to the Nashville Christian Advocate," The American (Nashville), July 19, 1878.
White, Winchell referred in his Lebenslauf to the Vanderbilt ordeal as a “case of decapitation within the walls of the inquisition.” Yet it was all for the good because he had since received “new sympathy and appreciation from very intelligent men . . . and from many who otherwise would probably have remained in ignorance of his existence.”

The so-called “Vanderbilt Controversy” of 1878 was indeed a widely chronicled event in Winchell’s own day, in large part due to a prolific media debate among religious and secular newspapers over the legitimacy of Winchell’s self-proclaimed martyr status. In more recent literature, historians continue to place Winchell’s expulsion in the broader context of escalating tensions between science and religion in the 1870s. Others have focused on Winchell’s particular expression of scientific racism as it relates to the emergence of anthropology and ethnography as distinctive disciplines. More commonly, emphasis has been placed on the institutional and theological dimensions of the Vanderbilt controversy, specifically the local politics of Vanderbilt and the widening theological gap between northern and southern Methodists. Despite all of this attention by historians, Winchell’s evangelical faith and his career as popular lecturer have never been examined in relation to one another, particularly within the social and cultural context of his rapidly changing denominational community.

Today we know that northern Methodists responded more calmly to Darwinism than their counterparts in the South. And, despite the events at Vanderbilt, it is also generally accepted that Methodism, as a whole, was more accommodating to the new science than evangelicals in the Reformed

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1Winchell, “Lebenslauf,” fols. 60, 61.
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Much less attention has been devoted, however, to the personal and cultural intricacies of this accommodation in the lives and careers of Methodist scientists, particularly those who sought the kind of professional status which science uniquely afforded in the late 19th century. Before Vanderbilt, Winchell had managed simultaneously to take on the roles of a devout churchman, a popular lecturer, and a leading educator. He was convinced, particularly as a lecturer, that science possessed a peculiar moral efficacy with evangelical implications. Ironically, the more he acted upon this desire for usefulness the more he experienced a growing tension between his piety and his profession.

The Vanderbilt controversy is an informative episode in the history of science and religion. But, as merely one isolated event in Winchell’s life, it tells us very little about the personal, vocational, and denominational process of scientific accommodation in postbellum America. The implications of this process were especially acute for those evangelical scientists who remained committed to their denominational communities. By 1878, Winchell had embraced the language of martyrdom and succumbed to the polemics of “warfare,” reflecting his growing anxiety over the feasibility of being both modern and evangelical. In this paper, I will trace the sources of this anxiety, focusing particularly on the evolving confrontation between his Wesleyan piety and his career ambitions prior to Vanderbilt.

I

Alexander Winchell’s career as mediator of science was, in part, a product of broader social and cultural forces in American Protestantism during the second half of the 19th century. He had been reared and educated at a time when evangelical piety, intellectual advancement, the ethic of professionalism, and the values of republicanism were being instilled in the rapidly expanding denominational culture of northern Methodism. At home and in Sunday school, Winchell was encouraged at an early age to be as devout in his mental endeavors as he was in his spiritual disciplines. His family was dedicated to learning and letters. Eleven of his relatives were educated clergymen and two were self-professed theologians. By the age of seven he had mastered reading and arithmetic and was beginning to study foreign languages. Winchell was also a spiritual mentor to many of his friends and family.

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*A. Gregory Schneider, The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), 164–168, 205–206. Schneider’s contrast between ‘objective’ enterprise (e.g., profession or career) and ‘subjective’ social religion and personal piety (205) has provided a helpful analytical approach in the present study.
members by age seventeen and was diligent in using all the Wesleyan “appointed means of grace.”11 He vowed at an early age to maintain the strict behavioral standards set forth by his mother, abstaining from tobacco, stimulating drink, and cigars.12 Some of Winchell's tenacious character was also derived from the influence of his civic-minded father. Winchell's later friend and pastor, Mark W. Harrington, recalled that “Horace, the father of Alexander, was a reformer in religious and political matters, laboring assiduously on the public platform, with his pen, and by private persuasion. His familiarity with the scriptures was remarkable, and his power of quotation amazing... From this vigorous, intellectual, and highly religious race was Alexander Winchell descended.”13

Beginning in the 1840s, a growing interest in the life of learning had merged with the notion of a “career of usefulness” among more educated and settled Methodists. For a select few, these ideals could be practiced as a life-long career in the new Methodist colleges and universities which dotted the eastern and midwestern landscapes of America. The result, according to Schneider, was the assimilation of evangelical piety to a “coherently rationalized life course characterized by continuous achievement in the service of universal human needs and interests.”14 For a growing number of young Methodists, this convergence of religious, political, and social concerns provided compelling reasons for entering the new fields of science.15 By the 1850s, Winchell's career at the University of Michigan had assumed the vocational style of “vernacular science”—a community- and media-oriented brand of scientific education that often combined the aura of intellectual expertise with simple empiricism and poetic or religious styles of rhetoric.16 In an era when disciplinary professionalism was on the rise, he remained openly committed to his Wesleyan evangelical heritage and thoroughly immersed in those denominational institutions and practices which had significantly shaped his own career as a “popularizer of science.”

Winchell’s most enduring connection to the church began in 1854 when he took charge of a Bible class in the local Methodist Episcopal church of Ann Arbor, Michigan. He immediately changed the format of the weekly gathering into a series of lectures on the relationship between religion and sci-

11See, for example, Franklin Huslebut to Alexander Winchell [1841], Box 1, folder 1, AWMHC.
14Schneider, 165–166.
15Methodist scientists such as Herbert W. Conn, William North Rice, and Winchell are highlighted in Roberts, 44–45, 139–140, 227–228.
ence. For eighteen years, the class grew until it numbered more than 300 members, meeting in the main sanctuary of the church. W. F. Breakey, fondly recalled that the class "delighted all who heard his lucid and instructive discourses, given in a familiar, off-hand manner, yet in a style clear and concise, showing the accuracy of the scholar, with the conscience of the Christian." Another listener recalled:

The scientific imagination which sees relations between things far distant in time and space was associated in him with the artist's joy at expressing these relations in words which suggest what words cannot express . . . in the higher regions of speculation, where, to use Dante's figure, the eyes of demonstration must be helped by the smile of persuasion, where additional weight must be given to arguments which necessarily fell short of demonstration, there he gave full play to the power of his which placed under the veil of language what the spirit and heart alone could see . . . Professor Winchell spoke the language of orators and poets, and no one can use with such ease and force this language who had not drunk deeply at the fountains which gave them inspiration.

Winchell's imaginative renderings of the "handiwork" or "footprints" of God were a key ingredient of his rhetorical style and an essential strategy for drawing audiences in the lecture circuits and print media of his day. A friend and colleague observed that "it is now recognized that the trained imagination is a necessary element in the mental outfit of the scientific investigator," necessary in the sense that the rational intellect was merely mechanical, but the creative use of imagination was able to bond the speaker and audience to each other and communicate a shared experience of the divine. When Winchell spoke before his class on the Sunday of Christmas Eve 1854, he described how "true" science turned the mind upward, compelling it to follow avenues of inquiry that led to ever more expansive notions of God. Winchell stressed that "by occupying our thoughts with high and enabling contemplations, in immediate connexion [sic] with the power and presence of God," we can be led "to admiration, to reverence, to love, and finally obedience." These evangelical motives dissolved any abstract barriers between science and religion, bringing the two disciplines together as "friends" and "parallel systems of eternal truth." Consequently, the scientifically-informed mind was filled with reverence and love "toward that Being whose footprints he finds everywhere in the field of science." Even the most skeptical of observers who recognize how thoroughly science supports the scriptures must inevitably embrace a "saving faith."

11Winchell, "On the True Relation of Science and Revelation, II" [unpublished lecture given at the Ann Arbor Methodist Episcopal Church], AMS, December 24, 1854, AWMHC.
In order for Winchell to maintain a strong emotional bond with his audience, he constructed a kind of paternal, perhaps even pastoral, role for himself. Through such expressions of affectionate mutuality and intimate disclosure, he reassured both religious and civic audiences that he was, above all, a deeply religious man driven by a pious motivation to disclose faith-building evidences for God in creation. Members of the audience were invited to journey with him toward the sacred “temple” of science where every object breathed the presence of the “Infinite Mind.” Speaking before the Young Men’s Literary Association of Ann Arbor in 1858, Winchell encouraged his audience to join him in examining the contents of this cosmic sanctuary: “Every stone is inscribed with a word of revelation; and as we ponder the meaning of these divine records, we feel thrilled with conviction, that we have possessed ourselves of thoughts that were conceived in the mind of the Omniscient. We go forth from our communings, purified and exalted in soul; and instead of banishing Deity from the universe, we delight to know that he exists on every side of us.”

In a commencement address at the University of Kentucky in 1866, Winchell again spoke with the evocative language of an evangelist trying to convert an audience to a higher transcendent truth:

I speak of science with a soul fired with the enthusiasm of truth—science with an eye of light that glances from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth—science winged with the ardor of perpetual inspiration—that sends her glances down all the ranks of society, and seeks out opportunities for good—lays her hand upon the tide of nature and turns it into channels of usefulness—makes the laws of matter her servants—bids the lightning carry her messages—the wind to row her vessels—the steam to run on errands, and perform herculean labors... Such science is of heavenly birth, and lifts the soul of him who embraces it, to the atmosphere of its kindred heaven.

Winchell continued by reminding the graduates that science was their friend and benefactor, that it had created for them a thousand conveniences, that it had built up society, that it had given dignity to the body politic, and, above all, that it “interprets to man the thoughts of Deity, and opens perpetual communion with the world of superior spirits.” He was convinced not only of the moral efficacy of science, but also of its ability to develop the religious nature and purify the soul.

The energy and zeal with which he conveyed such sentiments led one newspaper reporter in 1874 to observe that Winchell’s religious view “has the advantage of possession, and keeps its hold with a grip whose tenacity he seems unconscious of.” But after hearing one of Winchell’s lectures on evolution in person, the reporter went on to complain that “this would pass for

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effective preaching with a mixed popular audience, but as an illustration in an elaborate work addressed to scholars . . . it almost occasions dismay.” Apparently Winchell was so preoccupied with religion that he was unable to deal, at least in the mind of the more dispassionate audience member, “with the facts and problems of science in a purely scientific spirit and way.”

Winchell ignored the occasional criticism and, contrary to the advice of scientific colleagues, persisted in his determination “to present science in a popular garb.” By the 1870s, lyceums, literary societies, and church conferences were scheduling him for over thirty public engagements annually outside of Ann Arbor and throughout the Midwest and Northeast. One of the signs of his success was the publication of his lectures in widely distributed volumes like *Sketches of Creation* (1869/1870), *Reconciliation of Science and Religion* (1877), and *Sparks From a Geologist’s Hammer* (1881). In the preface to *Sketches* he described how the book would be useful to the “numerous class of intelligent persons . . . who recognize the great interest of the developments of recent science” and to the more serious student who occasionally needs to “enjoy a bird’s-eye view of the entire field at a glance, in order to give vividness, sharpness, locality, and permanence to the thoughts and images floating in his mind. To accumulate the data of science is good; to interpret them is the noblest prerogative of a thinking being. Science interpreted is theology. Science prosecuted to its conclusions leads to God.”

By the late 1870s, Winchell attributed his popular success to a dramatic rhetorical strategy: “He [Winchell] indicates by a few instances the starting point from which science proceeds, and then lifts the thoughts of the audience up to the lofty conclusion. The imagination of the listener becomes occupied; he gets absorbed in higher conceptions; he grasps wholes instead of parts and feels when the lecture is concluded that the universe is infinitely grander than he had ever dreamed.” Winchell prepared his listeners at the opening of each lecture for “grand conclusions” that would sweep them off their feet, persuading them to both discern and feel the presence of God in creation. In an age of unprecedented technological and intellectual advancement, he offered science to them as a new mode of religious devotion. Ultimately, he hoped his poetic discourse would broaden their intuition of God in the world. This could be accomplished by transforming each member of his audience through the imaginary construction of a new realm for being and action—one that enveloped the self in a universe of natural order, divine purpose, spiritual interconnectedness, and celestial beauty.

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24“Winchell’s Evolution,” *Golden Age* (Syracuse, New York), July 4, 1874.
Aside from Alexander Winchell’s success as a popular orator and writer, he had achieved notoriety as a theologian and philosopher within the more scholarly circles of northern Methodism. On January 5, 1872, theologian and editor Daniel Whedon (1808–1885) penned a letter to Winchell inviting him to become a frequent contributor to *The Methodist Quarterly Review* (*The MQR Review*), the leading scholarly journal of the Methodist Episcopal Church.\(^7\) Whedon was acting on the advice of Winchell’s friend and colleague at the University of Michigan, philosopher Benjamin Cocker (1821–1883), who had already begun writing for the journal on the latest developments in Scottish and German philosophy. With the help of a professional scientist like Winchell, Whedon hoped to broaden the scope and readership of *MQR* by introducing educated Methodist clergy and laity to the latest “spiritual light and information” of science.\(^8\) To achieve this goal, Whedon reminded contributors like Winchell that, while the journal was a respectable publication, even the most scientific articles must be written in a style that was “not too high in its vocabulary or too terse and stern for popular use.”\(^9\)

Whedon had been a first-generation participant and active supporter of the Methodist embrace of intellectual culture, beginning with his professorship in ancient languages and literature at Wesleyan College (later Wesleyan University) in Middletown, Connecticut from 1833 to 1843.\(^10\) Arriving soon after, Winchell was among the first generation of Methodists to benefit from Wesleyan’s diversified curriculum, particularly its emphasis on science. Eventually both men held teaching positions at the University of Michigan, Whedon from 1845 to 1851 and Winchell from 1855 to 1873, yet they main-

\(^7\) Daniel D. Whedon, New York City, to Prof. Winchell [Ann Arbor, Michigan], January 5, 1872, Box 2, folder 39, AWMHC.


\(^9\) See, for example, D. D. Whedon, New York City, to Dr. Winchell [Syracuse, New York], August 7, 1876, Box 2, folder 43, AWMHC.

tained close ties throughout their careers with Methodist institutions such as Syracuse University in New York and Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. Besides their correspondence and exchanges in MQR, Whedon and Winchell also maintained close contact through their mutual relationship with Benjamin Cocker. The trio comprised the immediate matrix of theological and philosophical discourse which factored strongly in Winchell’s own intellectual development in the 1860s and 1870s.

Whedon was a dominant figure throughout his denomination both by virtue of his editorship at MQR and his authorship of the most important and widely praised book in Methodist theology during the middle decades of the 19th century, _The Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Human Responsibility and a Divine Government_ (1864). More than any previously published text, this work demonstrated the culmination of a distinct shift in American Methodism away from its British sources (most notably Richard Watson) toward a more philosophically grounded doctrine of moral responsibility based on intuitional realism. In opposition to the moral anthropology of Jonathan Edwards, Whedon argued that a fundamental intrinsic freedom is required to satisfy the requirements of a universally recognized “Maxim of Responsibility.” Instead of reconciling the universal sense of moral responsibility to some theological system (i.e., Calvinism), a new system ought to be constructed on the basis of moral consciousness or intuition. “We have first assumed the prior validity of the intuitions,” he observed, “and then sought by their guidance to ascertain how our psychology and logic may be brought into harmony with their dicta.”

Among the far-reaching implications of Whedon’s _Freedom of the Will_ was the subjection of biblical revelation and Wesleyan categories of experience to philosophical intuition and the analysis of human consciousness. Cocker and, subsequently, Winchell began to extend Whedon’s notion of moral freedom into the new realm of psychology, opening up new understandings of being and action that simultaneously interpreted and shaped their own religious experiences. Cocker joined Whedon in abandoning Watson’s restrictive “world of sensation,” endorsing instead the more idealist (Kantian) constructions of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Victor Cousin. Common Sense philosophy, with its appeal to objective reality, cause and effect, and the unity of the mind was certainly a viable apologetic for many Protestant theologians living in an era of scientific rationalism. But for those individuals steeped in the Wesleyan tradition, with its emphasis on “heart religion” and the need for profound moral regeneration, epistemological Common Sense did not in itself offer a compelling mode of philosophizing personal religious experience. The doctrine of moral intuition, as developed in the ethical

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strand of Common Sense philosophy, provided an important avenue for mediation between the kind of emotional piety which Methodists had emphasized in their own evangelical tradition and the objective reality which Common Sense, in general, deemed as both accessible and essential to faith. Cocker and Whedon were among the first in their denomination to follow this path and recommend it to a new generation of educated clergy and academic professionals in the expanding network of Methodist higher education.

In Winchell’s first submission to MQR, he expressed an acceptance of Cocker’s notion of religious intuition, praising his colleagues’s first book as a successful attempt “to introduce to personal consciousness the axioms of religious philosophy.” Cocker’s vocabulary was dignified and rich, but, more importantly, it was “forcible, sometimes sententious, and always remarkably transparent.” Through his occasional “premature broaching of the heart,” Cocker spoke directly to Winchell’s own experience, enabling the scientist to articulate a correlation between his own high valuation of the “reason of man” and the universal “instinct and emotion of worship.” Winchell also expressed an appreciation of Cocker that extended beyond the pages of MQR into the realm of a personal friendship that was sustained throughout the 1870s.

As an enthusiastic member of this local and denominational community of discourse, Winchell began to speculate on the broader significance of religious intuition, focusing especially on the moral psychology of Princeton’s James McCosh. Self-consciousness and sense perception, according to McCosh, together informed all humans of the reality of their own existence as well as external objects but, more importantly, of their obligation to respond to that knowledge. All of humanity thus possessed an “infallible intuition,” an epistemological conviction that had far-reaching ethical and cultural implications. In a two-part series in MQR on the religious nature of “savages” published in 1875, Winchell went beyond McCosh and Cocker in proposing a direct link between ethical advancement, afforded by religious intuition, and intellectual capacity. He reasoned that if, according to the latest anthropological findings, the human mind needed the idea of God to “satisfy its deep moral necessities and harmonize its powers,” transcendent experience must also satisfy a “deep-seated longing... to feel after God and find him.” See Cocker, “Metaphysics,” 195.


See, for example, B. F. Cocker, “The Moral Philosophy of ‘The Institutes of Theology,’ by Rev. Richard Watson,” MQR 24 (January 1864): 5–28; Christianity and Greek Philosophy: or, the Relation between Spontaneous and Reflective Thought in Greece and the Positive Teaching of Christ and His Apostles (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1870), 70–78; and D. D. Whedon, Statements: Theological and Critical, ed. J. S. Whedon (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1887), which contains numerous editorials collected from the MQR.


See, for example, Winchell Diary, March 27, 1872, September 9, 1875, and June 29, 1879, Box 13, AWMHC.
polological data, the religious sense was a universal datum in human nature, then ethical advancement, and hence the progress of "civilization," must somehow be correlated with the more variable attribute of human intelligence:

When, from the religious phenomena of savages, we turn to the history of mankind at large and consider the wide prevalence of vast religious systems, the religious pretensions of all schools of philosophy, and the Divine breathings of the poetry of all peoples, and, finally, the utter ineradicability of the religious sentiments of mankind, it would seem an act either of fatuity or perversity to deny that the ethical faculties are fundamentally co-ordinate with the intellectual, and hence answer to correlates in the realm of being, as real as the existences revealed by the activity of any of the cognitive faculties of our nature.40

A year later, in yet another article published in MQR, Winchell provided a more elaborate explanation of the relation between intelligence and the universal religious sense. "The religious feelings," he observed, "hold the first place in respect to influence over the lives of men." Intuitions of God and of eternal life did not depend on conditions of wealth, power, health, age, or sex—they were sui generis. But humans did differ, he argued, in the intensity and development of their religious feelings, just as they differed in their intellect, amiability, and "physique." Relying on Cocker's second book, The Theistic Conception of the World (1876), Winchell proposed that ultimately the "moral government of the world" required intelligence. Religious belief must be previously sanctioned by reason in order for it to be able to morally "elevate our civilization, and the enterprises which advance the happiness of the race."41 In keeping with the moral anthropology outlined in Whedon's Freedom of the Will, Winchell then appealed to the human will as the "original, uncaused cause," a human attribute necessary not only for moral government but also for intuiting the will of a benevolent God.

Winchell again praised the work of Cocker as "a finished product of broad philosophical reflection" which "sheds a genuine luster upon American authorship." Cocker had introduced McCosh's lucid depiction of God as a "personal Intelligent Will" in a way that did not yield to pantheism or the "unsound judgments" of agnostics like Herbert Spencer.42 Rather, it inspired a beatific vision that, for Winchell, informed and consoled:

It is a vision of God, of his own free will resolving to create a world and populate it with beings physically adapted to it, but yet in his own spiritual image—beings to be made happy; a vision of God in the world, maintaining it, communing with it, admitting himself into the consciousness of his beloved intelligences; speaking to them in the voiceless whispers of reason, in the radiant beauties of the field and the sky, or in the awful voices of the storm and the earthquake, and the collapse of planetary systems; God with us—Immanuel—strengthening and cheering, lifting us up and pitying us in our distresses, watching for the whispered prayer, responsive to the hymn of adoration, enfolding us with his love through

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Winchell, "God in the World," 528, 516–517.
all the journey of mortal life, and then, when the light of the cerulean heaven fades in our
glazing eyes, revealing us to ourselves in the midst of a light which mortal eyes cannot
behold, and which floods with ineffable glories that other world from which we are now
shut—not by distance, but by life.  

Winchell had thus brought together two important strands of thought that
were essential to his own self-understanding as a Methodist purveyor of sci-
ence. Whedon's emphasis on moral freedom and responsibility and Cocker's
emphasis on intelligence and religious intuition were combined in Winchell's
imaginative rendering of a universally intuited God in and with the world and
in his theological construction of the scientific vocation. The scholarly ideas
of his colleagues had immediate personal relevance to Winchell, providing an
intellectual framework that could be readily conveyed to popular audiences in
highly evocative language and dramatic oratory. Religious meaning and pur-
pose could thus be extended beyond the traditional spheres of evangelical
action to the new spheres of scientific inquiry and professional achievement.
Winchell's synthesis of ethical Arminianism and intuitional realism was not
merely an intellectual achievement. More importantly, it was a rationalization
that served to make the world meaningful for life and action as a scientist and
member of the educated class of society.

III

Beginning as far back as his Sunday School lectures in the 1850s,
Alexander Winchell had managed to negotiate between a complex social
matrix of cultural authorities and discourse communities. He used a particu-
lar language to define both his career and his social location: his campaign as
an evangelist of scientific enlightenment and reconciliation and his quest for
influence as a distinguished member of what he would increasingly refer to
as the "thinking class." By the 1870s, he had appropriated an elaborate theo-
logical framework from fellow Methodists that enabled him to carry on with
this mission at both the popular and scholarly levels of his denomination.

During this same period, Winchell was also actively engaged in other
more "professional" pursuits, a diverse array of scientific and educational ini-
tiatives that increasingly demanded more of his time and energy in the later
decades of his career. As early as 1858, he began serving as the president of
the Michigan State Teachers Association and, in the following year, assumed
the editorship of the Michigan Journal of Education.  

Winchell, "God in the World," 529.
fare, his appointment attracted the attention of prominent individuals far
removed from his usual sphere of influence. Winchell’s fame spread as far
south as the new Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where he began a regu­
lar series of visiting lectureships in 1875.

Even though Winchell’s itinerary was becoming more crowded, he man­
aged to maintain close ties with his denominational community throughout
most of the 1870s. He continued to publish articles for Whedon in MQR. He
submitted numerous scientific articles to local Methodist newspapers like the
Northern Christian Advocate at Syracuse. He maintained frequent correspon­
dence with fellow-Methodists like Cocker. He spoke before Methodist audi­
ences whenever he was given the opportunity. As the decade wore on, how­
ever, his career of usefulness began to suffer from an increasing internal ten­
sion between his popular and professional modes of self-understanding and
public engagement. The conflict was evident, though unacknowledged, in the
more scholarly arena of MQR where Winchell began to construct and legiti­
mate a distinctive new identity as an expert man of science. In the same arti­
cle in which he had celebrated Cocker’s explanation of the universal scope of
religious feeling and its corollary of moral freedom, Winchell distinguished
between two “classes” of individuals on the basis of their intellectual or intu­
tional capacity. First, there was the mass audience which was moved by arti­
fice and emotional persuasion, the kind of audience drawn to evangelists like
Dwight L. Moody. Most people, Winchell observed, “need arrested attention,
aroused religious emotions, quickened religious perceptions” to believe in
God, not rational argument. Thus, Winchell reassured his readers, Moody
and his fellow evangelists served a useful function that met the needs of the
vast popular audiences of the day.

There was, however, a second class of individuals, a “thinking class,”
which “cannot be reached by such efforts as long as certain antecedent and
fundamental questions of evidence remain unsettled in their minds.” This spe­
cial class stood apart from the “great mass of people” by virtue of its higher
intuitions, stronger motives, and “executive power.” This was a distinct group
of thinkers who were susceptible to both religious experience and “the strong
influence of habits of intellectual inquiry.” For this “thinking class,” Winchell
insisted that security against the attacks of doubt could only be afforded
through a process of reflection. The religious sense was everywhere manifest,
but the intellectually inclined, in whom the “ideas which elevate our civiliza­

\textsuperscript{44}Winchell, “Lebenslauf,” fol. 45. Winchell cited a New York Tribune quote from the venerable
Princetonian, Charles Hodge: “... the Chancellor of Syracuse University in this state, is a much
younger man, less addicted to theology than to natural science, not known to so large a public,
but held in the highest esteem in scientific and literary circles, the author of several works of
excellent fame in his favorite department of study, with a freshness and earnestness of thought
which give promise of future achievements of high import, and with a mental courage that does
not shrink from the sacrifice of custom and tradition for loyalty to truth.”

\textsuperscript{45}Winchell, “Lebenslauf,” fol. 45-53.

\textsuperscript{46}Winchell, “God in the World,” 514.
tion" originate, require argument as well as persuasion. "Their attitude toward the tenets and institutions of Christianity will be determined by the claims and pretensions of professing Christians; by the results of a study of Christian evidences; by the awakenss power which is brought to bear upon them; by education, example, friendships, or other accidents." Science offered the most profound and convincing arguments of all—resolving "doubts which cannot be dissipated by the fervor of a hymn, nor exorcised by the authority of a sermon."

In 1876, when Winchell presented this two-tiered model of society to readers of MQR, he was still sympathetic to the evangelical enterprise of popular preachers like Moody. Winchell was, after all, a kind of evangelist himself, employing many of the same methods of persuasion before his non-scientific audiences and continually sensing the pulse of popular mood and opinion. Under the direction of a skillful teacher, emotional responses could be used to open the "intuitional eye" to broader vistas of comprehension. As late as 1877, in an article in MQR, Winchell wrote in the evocative style of a revival preacher on the spiritual implications of science. But Winchell departed once again from his usual subject matter to analyze the mentality of his broader audience, this time sorting out the increasingly more complex and unpredictable responses to the claims of science. He expressed frustration over the growing conflict between religion and science and traced its origin to a nagging division within mass culture: "The popular apprehensions existed, as they have always existed, in the minds of one class who have no adequate knowledge of the nature and force of scientific evidence, and of another class who rather enjoy the spectacle when theology gets a pelting, even if with mere 'tufts of grass.'"

In the year before the Vanderbilt controversy, Winchell knew that his broader, or imagined audience, was fragmented and polarized. The arena of popular culture no longer resembled his ideal notion of a relatively coherent body of opinion that could be easily swayed through poetic discourse and religious expressions of mutuality and intimate self-disclosure. Nor could he depend on the dynamic interplay between his imaginative powers and his audience to produce the kind of beautific visions and communal sentiments that had sustained his "evangelical" mission as popularizer of science. Winchell was vulnerable to a growing contradiction in his theological and philosophical framework. On the one hand, his emphasis on the universal dimensions of religious intuition possessed an egalitarian implication; on the other hand, his emphasis on the hierarchical distribution of intellectual capacities suggested an elitist bent. Inevitably, he chose the path that not only offered the least resistance but also the most tangible rewards. He began to

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revel in the growing attention he was receiving in more professional circles. He was already enjoying some of his greatest successes in the professional arenas of science and education, and influential journals like *Popular Science Monthly* were praising his most recent collection of lectures and essays entitled, *Reconciliation of Science and Religion* (1877). He was also preoccupied with the final details of his theory of preadamism, his ambitious attempt to piece together a multidisciplinary explanation of human origins and Anglo-Saxon superiority. Buoyed by his professional achievements, Winchell was confident that he had achieved a major scientific breakthrough. At the same time he was uncharacteristically oblivious to the potential impact of his controversial theory on a more volatile and divided climate of popular religious opinion.

For over twenty years, Winchell’s estimations of the identity and needs of his audiences had shaped his own agenda and his own self-understanding. In return, he had relied on his own imaginative powers, his pious self-disclosure, and his growing reputation to achieve the trust and authority needed for popular persuasion. This vocational strategy had provided a connection between his own desire for social usefulness and the religious expectations he had perceived in the lecture halls and periodicals of his day. But, as Winchell soon discovered, the success of that strategy, along with the personal meaning and satisfaction he had derived from it, was precarious.

The saga at Vanderbilt in 1878 represents the final unravelling of Winchell’s vocational ideal and a distinctive new chapter in his public career. The controversy served as a catalyst for change in Winchell’s attitudes toward the church and the broader American public, as well as his own self-understanding as a professional scientist. These attitudes are strikingly evident in the style of discourse he adopted. As the debate accelerated and widened in church periodicals, Winchell abandoned the well-rehearsed public rhetoric of religious persuasion in favor of an increasingly more militant and elitist style of expression. In his more conflicted moments, he engaged in the discourse of a defeated and paranoid guardian of culture. In his more confident moments,

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52 According to Winchell’s diary, the project became something of an obsession in the final months of 1877. See Winchell diary, 1877, Box 13, AWMHC. The months of October and November feature numerous references to preadamism. He later recalled that much of his time was spent recasting the work that had been “so long contemplated” into a new interpretive framework. Several attempts were then made to turn his vast collection of notes into a book-length manuscript. Winchell’s public lectures were now entirely devoted to preadamism and the “antiquity of man.” See Winchell, “Lebenslauf,” fol. 57.
53 “Bigoted” and “medieval” were his favorite labels for the opponents of “free inquiry,” whether they be in state legislatures, in the new public universities, or his own denominational institutions. Winchell saved some of his most bitter rhetoric for his opponents at Vanderbilt University like Thomas O. Summers. See Winchell Diary, June 21, 1876 and March 31, 1878, Box 13, AWMHC; “Prof. Winchell: His Reply to the Nashville Christian Advocate,” *The American* (Nashville), July 19, 1878.
he articulated his ambitions in terms of a scientific manager of society, adopting a language that was devoid of evangelical aspirations. 54 Though he continued to write occasional articles for MQR, he directed most of his energy to more “professional” journals like Science, the American Journal of Science, or Popular Science Monthly. Winchell’s career of vernacular science was not over. He was still able to rouse the occasional church audience with his poetic renderings of the scientific vocation. However, the “evangelical” dimensions of his campaign were now peripheral to his more “professional” understanding of usefulness. Science was no longer an arena for religious conversion but an instrument for cultural guardianship. 55

This paper has demonstrated the intricate, yet highly fragile, matrix of ideas and practices which comprised Alexander Winchell’s early career of popularizing science. His pursuit of religious influence and public notoriety was nurtured within the evangelical subculture of his family and the expanding institutional life of northern Methodism. The story of Winchell’s development highlights both the freedom to create new strategies for being and action within these contexts as well as the barriers that inevitably arise when diverse aspirations are found to be irreconcilable. Winchell discovered a new way to be socially useful only as he was beginning to confront the realities of a contentious religious audience. He also found that the objective demands of scientific endeavor, particularly under the guise of the new “thinking class,” were no longer compatible with the more subjective aspects of his evangelical self-understanding. Neither the occurrences nor the outcomes of these conflicts were inevitable in the protean world of the “Methodist Age.” Factors like parental influence, educational path, friendship networks, theological or intellectual grid, access to popular media, and professional success each presented new alternatives to Winchell along the way. The choices he made as he journeyed through the maze culminated in a synergistic link between piety and profession. But the relationship between these two modes of identity was always provisional, always subject to the pressures of new demands and pursuits. After Vanderbilt, the synergy was lost. Piety and profession were partitioned according to the dictates of modernity. No longer a mediator or a reconciler, he became a militant martyr to the truth of science.

54 In the 1880s, Winchell began writing diatribes for the North American Review on the barbarity of demagoguery, the tyranny of popular opinion, the anarchy of universal suffrage, and other threats to “high scientific culture.” See, for example, Alexander Winchell, “The Experiment of Universal Suffrage,” The North American Review 136 (February 1883): 119–134; and “Incipient Communism in the United States,” The North American Review 136 (May 1883): 454–466.

55 One of Winchell’s most notable professional achievements was his leadership role in organizing the Geological Society of America in 1888. See Davenport, “Alexander Winchell,” 197–198.