

**THE UN-HERETICAL CHRISTIAN:
LYNN HAROLD HOUGH, DARWINISM AND CHRISTIANITY
IN 1920S AMERICA**

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The years between the American Civil War and World War I were a time of revolutionary change in American Protestantism. The appearance of scientific materialism and the theory of biological evolution presented new problems for religious views of humankind and the world. Historian Ira V. Brown once noted that “It appears that theology must be modified constantly to keep pace with advancing knowledge and changing social conditions.”¹ The late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century were critical periods in the shaping of American religion, largely due to the liberalizing movement initiated by men like Borden Parker Bowne, Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, and Lynn Harold Hough. Through their teaching and writing, these Methodist theologians, along with philosophers such as Bowne and Olin A. Curtis, “explored the new philosophies of man [*sic*] and nature and expressed their answers in psychological and cosmological theories which established the case for a spiritual understanding of personality and the natural order.”²

The critical period of intellectual adjustment emerged in the 1870s, a period that began with the publication of Darwin’s *Descent of Man* (1871). It may be said that American Methodism’s more advanced thinkers “defended the reasonableness of biblical theism (in the face of the new evolutionary science and thought)” by “divorcing the evolutionary naturalist of any scientific ground for his atheisms” and “explicit[ing] the inevitability of the theistic situation to the question of ultimate causation.”³ One such thinker was Lyman Abbott (1835-1922). Abbott’s influence on American Protestantism was profound. As William Warren Sweet, an authority on American church history noted, “no religious leader in the modern period has exercised a more abiding influence.”⁴

It was Abbott’s mission to persuade Americans that science and faith were compatible and that the new scientific theory of evolution was, as he

¹ Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist: A Study in Religious Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953), vii.

² Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*, vol. II (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 595.

³ Bucke, *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*, vol. II, 385.

⁴ See Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist*, vii.

and John Fiske believed, “God’s way of doing things.”⁵ Further, they insisted that the new liberal theology did not mean the death of God. For Abbott, the new science and the new scholarship demonstrated that God governed the world. Abbott believed that both higher criticism and evolutionary philosophy were progressive and that this new trend was nothing more than a simple study of the evolution of the Bible. Abbott argued that “the science of evolution and the science of theology have the same ultimate end . . . both attempt to furnish an orderly, rational, and self-consistent account of phenomena.”⁶ Many Christians found this line of reasoning far more acceptable than the idea of evolution guided only by blind chance, or Darwinian evolutionary theory.

Like Abbott, John Fiske (1842-1901), a historian and nominal Congregationalist, believed in the concept of theistic evolution. Theistic evolution allows for the harmonization of evolution with Christianity, for it holds that some or all classical religious teachings about God and creation are compatible with some or all of the modern scientific understanding about biological evolution. Fiske stated in his book *Excursions of an Evolutionist* (1883) that evolution was God’s way of doing things and aimed to show that there had never been any conflict between science and religion, nor was there any need for reconciliation, because harmony had always existed.⁷ This assertion was in sharp contrast to the works of contemporaries such as John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White, who both, in the years between 1874 and 1895, argued that there *was* conflict and that a battle *did* exist between religion and science.⁸ Aside from those who created and supported the “battlefield” metaphor, there were some theologians, such as Fiske, Abbott, and Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910), who saw the relationship quite differently.

Bowne was a seminal figure in the theological debate over evolution by American Protestant theologians. Born in rural New Jersey, he entered New York University in 1867 and in 1873 was invited to study in Europe. During his visit to Europe, Bowne was influenced by Kantian philosophy under the tutelage of Rudolph Hermann Lotze (1817-1881) at the University of Göttingen. After receiving his Master’s Degree from NYU in 1876, Bowne joined the philosophy department at Boston University, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Bowne was a popular preacher, and is best known for his contributions to the philosophy of religion. His views reflected theistic naturalism. In his book, *The Principles of Ethics* (1892), Bowne wrote:

the spiritual is not something apart from the natural, as a kind of detached move-

⁵ Lyman Abbott, *The Theology of an Evolutionist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 3.

⁶ Abbott, *The Theology of an Evolutionist*, 4.

⁷ John Fiske, *Excursions of an Evolutionist* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1902).

⁸ See John Draper, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (New York: D. Appleton, 1874) and Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896).

ment; it is rather the natural self, rising toward its ideal form through the free activity of the moral person. The natural can be understood only through the spiritual, to which it points: and the spiritual gets contented only through the natural, in which it roots.⁹

Bowne saw, in this view, evolution as not “an object of apprehensive interest to the Christian theist” but “the natural and orderly way of God working.”¹⁰ The mere fact of evolution was, according to these liberal theologians, “not capable of either theistic or anti-theistic interpretation.”¹¹ These liberal Protestant theologians and philosophers paved the way for even more progressively minded theologians like Lynn Harold Hough (1877-1971).

This article examines the influence of late nineteenth-century theological and philosophical liberalism on Lynn Harold Hough and his efforts to incorporate evangelical liberalism into the conversation over evolution in 1920s America. Its focus is the year 1925, when liberal theologians in American Protestantism perceived—as Abbott, Bowne and Fiske did in the late nineteenth century—no conflict between science and religion. In a period of “battle” between fundamentalists and liberals over evolution, Hough’s sermon “Charles Darwin, Evolution and the Christian Religion” reflects the earlier sentiments of liberal theologians like Abbott by seeing the principle of evolution as having application to the elucidation of spiritual truth.¹²

By the beginning of the twentieth century, many liberal evangelical Protestant theologians, such as Hough, felt that Christianity could assimilate evolutionary concepts without compromise.¹³ How they succeeded in doing so was to develop arguments that evolution “required a God behind it and that the processes of evolution themselves testified to a designing mind.”¹⁴ As Thomas Galloway noted in 1910, “It has come to be frankly allowed that a man may be an evolutionist and at the same time believe in a theistic solution of the universe . . . it is appearing that the evolutionary philosophy has something constructive to offer regarding the higher human qualities and the religious impulses.”¹⁵ The presupposition was that if Christianity is to be saved from irrelevance, “then the advances in science and culture demand some kind of adjustment of traditional, orthodox Christian dogma

⁹ Borden Parker Bowne, *Principles of Ethics* (New York: Harper, 1892), 304.

¹⁰ Emil C. Wilm and John Alfred Faulkner, “The Late Professor Borden P. Bowne,” *The American Journal of Theology* 14.3 (July, 1910): 423.

¹¹ Wilm and Faulkner, 424.

¹² Lynn Harold Hough, “Charles Darwin, Evolution and Christianity,” sermon preached at the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, Detroit, Michigan, June 21, 1925. This sermon was reprinted in *The Christian World Pulpit* (July 23, 1925), and in the *Michigan Christian Advocate* (August 20, 1925).

¹³ William J. McCutcheon, “Theology of the Methodist Episcopal Church during the Inter-War Period, 1919-1939,” *Church History* 29.3 (September, 1960): 35.

¹⁴ Edward Justin Pfeifer, “The Reception of Darwinism in the United States, 1859-1880,” *Church History* 30.1 (March, 1961): 109.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Galloway, “Does Evolutionary Philosophy Offer any Constructive Argument for the Reality of God?” *The Harvard Theological Review* 3.4 (October, 1910): 500.

to the world-view of modern man [*sic*].”¹⁶ It seemed as though the conflict between evolution and religion, from the standpoint of liberal American Protestant theologians, had been diffused. Or had it?

The Fundamentalist Response to Darwin and Liberal Protestantism

As George Marsden argued, fundamentalism “is used in so many ways that a definition is the only place to begin.”¹⁷ Fundamentalism, according to Marsden, refers to a twentieth-century movement aligned to the revivalist tradition of mainstream Protestantism. This movement militantly opposed modernist theology and the culture associated with it. Whereas modernism or liberal theology tended to explain life in terms of natural developments, fundamentalists stressed “the supernatural.”¹⁸ The most distinct doctrinal differences were the inerrancy of scripture, divine creation as opposed to biological evolution, and a dispensational, pre-millennial scheme that explained historical change in terms of divine control. By the 1920s, fundamentalist Christians in America were engaged in what they referred to as spiritual warfare. The reason: by the 1920s evolutionary theory had been generally accepted by liberal American theologians, who “adapted their theological positions to it.”¹⁹

The fundamentalist battle against new ideas “was fought with materials from both the Bible and the common stockpile of American assumptions and concepts.”²⁰ Marsden argued that “the fundamentalist response to Darwin . . . was not an anti-intellectualist one framed in terms of the incompatibility of science and religion;” rather “it was an objection to a type of science—a developmental type—which they almost always branded as unscientific.”²¹ The greater the claims for a naturalistic developmental point of view, the more the fundamentalist Christians opposed them.

Thus, after the publication of *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915), believers began an active crusade to stop the teaching of evolution in American public schools. On January 23, 1922, a bill was introduced into the Kentucky legislature to do so, in response to a newspaper dialogue over evolution that arose between a professor at the University of Kentucky and Dr. J. W. Porter of the First Baptist Church of Lexington.²² The Butler Act, Tennessee House of Representatives Bill No. 185, was introduced soon after the debate in Kentucky, passing in the House on March 13, 1925, and approved by the

¹⁶ Charley D. Hardwick, “Edwin Lewis: Introductory and Critical Remarks,” *Gateway* (Winter, 1963): 92.

¹⁷ George Marsden, “Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon: A Comparison with English Evangelicalism,” *Church History* 46.2 (June, 1977): 215.

¹⁸ Marsden, 215.

¹⁹ Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*, vol. III (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 261.

²⁰ Marsden, 228.

²¹ Marsden, 230.

²² Alonzo W. Fortune, “The Kentucky Campaign against the Teaching of Evolution,” *Journal of Religion* 2.3 (May, 1922): 225-226.

Speaker of the Senate eight days later. It was into this world that Lynn Harold Hough spoke to his congregation about the possibility of being both an evolutionist *and* a Christian.

A Brief Biography of Lynn Harold Hough

Lynn Harold Hough was born in Cadiz, Ohio on September 10, 1877. He earned his Bachelor's Degree with honors from Scio College in 1898 and his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Drew Theological Seminary in 1905. Hough attended Scio College at what was considered its "golden age" and, as Hough recalled later, was where he "grappled with the proper relationship between religion and culture."²³

During his tenure at Drew, Hough was exposed to liberal theological thought through his mentor, Olin A. Curtis (1850-1918). Curtis, Professor of Systematic Theology at Drew, was, "representative of a tentative, rather different step" utilizing "personalistic philosophy and current psychology to develop his position" theologically.²⁴ Curtis had arrived at Drew from the Boston University School of Theology, a school noted for being the "most interdisciplinary, inclusive and important school of Methodist theology in North America."²⁵ Having studied at Boston, Leipzig, Erlangen, Marburg, and Edinburgh, Curtis's study abroad "brought back not only German biblical research but also the philosophies of Schleiermacher, Lotze, and Ritschl" which assisted in polarizing "growing liberal conviction . . ."²⁶

As Thomas Langford notes, during the first half of the twentieth century, several members of the Drew Theological Seminary faculty, like Curtis, "represented a critical stance toward the regnant liberal theological ethos, which was also represented on the same faculty."²⁷ Hough earned high marks in his courses at Drew, especially in Systematic Theology (with Curtis), Hebrew, and Extemporaneous Preaching.²⁸ After completion of his B.D. degree, Hough spent time taking courses at New York University and ministered full-time, holding pastorates at King's Park, New York (1906-1907), Third Church, Long Island City (1907-1909), Summerfield Church, Brooklyn (1909-1912), and Mt. Vernon Place Church, Baltimore (1912-1914).²⁹

Hough obtained a teaching position as Professor of Historical Theology at

²³ Floyd T. Cunningham, *The Christian Faith Personally Given: Divergent Trends in 20th Century Methodist Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkin, 1983), 47.

²⁴ Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity, Volume 1, Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 163.

²⁵ Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 114. Chiles argues that Bowne reinterpreted Methodist theology and set it upon a new course of development.

²⁶ See Chiles, 63. Chiles notes that this illustrated the shift away from theology toward a philosophy of religion, one of the distinctive traits of the period.

²⁷ Langford, 164.

²⁸ Grades taken from the *Drew Theological Seminary Grade Book, 1898-1903*, Drew University Archives, Madison, New Jersey.

²⁹ Erving E. Beauregard, "Lynn Harold Hough: Servant of Humanity," *Methodist History* 37.4 (July, 1999): 226.

Garrett Biblical Institute, which he held from 1914 until 1919, believing that his studies “might do some good in the professional world.”³⁰ Hough continued to minister, teach, and study. He left Garrett in 1919 for Northwestern University, to serve as President. Only one year after his arrival, Hough resigned due to poor health. Returning to complete his studies, Hough received his Doctor of Theology degree from Drew Theological Seminary in April, 1920, and assumed the pastorate at Central Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit, Michigan. Between 1906 and 1925, Hough had twenty-three books published addressing such diverse topics as *The Theology of a Preacher* (1911) and *Evangelical Humanism* (1925). Hough was also known to be a preacher of unusual insight and power, winning him distinction for all of his pursuits, scholarly and theological.³¹ In fact, in a *New York Times* article dated December 22, 1924, Hough was named among a list of “the twenty-five most influential preachers in America” as chosen by ballot of 25,000 Protestant clergymen.³² Hough’s name was “a Methodist watchword and few men had preached so often to students on college campuses.”³³

As John T. Cunningham wrote in *University in the Forest: The Story of Drew University* (1972), Hough had become, by 1925, an outstanding American authority in Critical Humanism.³⁴ Hough’s biography mentions that he was heavily influenced by his professors at Drew Theological Seminary, as well as by the works of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) and Paul Elmer More (1864-1937). Babbitt, a noted literary critic, and More, a journalist and critic, are best known for their involvement in the New Humanism movement, a movement that applied literary criticism to cultural and political thought in the period between 1910 and 1930. Thus, it is clear that Hough’s training in seminary and his exposure to liberal theology and modernism had left him open to accept the validity of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Hough, like his contemporaries, “reflected the prevailing mood”³⁵ of liberalism of the time. However, not all Methodist theologians considered themselves liberals or moderns.

Changing Perspectives in Methodism: Liberalism and the Moderns

Robert E. Chiles, in his work *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935*, notes the significant changes taking place in Methodism after the Civil War, particularly with respect to biblical interpretation. Methodism, he argues, “gave more and more attention to the challeng-

³⁰ Beauregard, 228.

³¹ See Arlo Ayers Brown’s sketch of Hough on the eve of his retirement in 1947, in *The Drew Gateway* 18.3 (Spring, 1947): 33.

³² “8 New York City Preachers Among the 25 Voted as Leaders by American Clergy,” *New York Times* (December 22, 1924): 1.

³³ John T. Cunningham, *University in the Forest: The Story of Drew University* (Andover, NJ: Afton, 1972), 199.

³⁴ Cunningham, 199.

³⁵ Bucke, *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*, vol. III, 264.

es of science, particularly as expressed by Darwin and the Evolutionists.³⁶ Similarly, Leland Howard Scott, in his study of American Methodism in the Nineteenth Century (1954), states that the movement of American intellectuals toward a new evolutionary science was marked by new perspectives providing the impetus in America for the so-called “higher criticism.”³⁷ Randolph Sinks Foster (1820-1903), Professor of Systematic Theology at Drew Theological Seminary (1868-1870) and later President (1870-1873), delivered several Ingham Lectures devoted to discussions of Darwinism and evolutionary theory. His lecture, “Origin of Species: An Examination of Darwinism” begins with the statement, “We have seen that the Bible, as to the origin of life, finds no foe in, and has no litigations with, science.”³⁸ Foster later argues that science is not an enemy to faith, as long as one recognizes that God is the primary force that “has root and hold of existence.”³⁹

American Methodism’s more liberal minds, according to Scott, also admired the writings of Methodist geologist Alexander Winchell (1824-1891). In 1873, Winchell delivered a series of lectures at Drew Theological Seminary (December 10th and 15th) on “The Doctrine of Evolution: Its Data, Its Principles, Its Speculations, and Its Theistic Bearings.” Published by Harper and Brothers in 1874, Winchell’s lectures hoped to “exhibit to the inquirer its [that is, evolution’s] strongest defenses and its weakest points.”⁴⁰ After carefully explaining from a geological perspective Darwin’s theory of evolution and objections to specific derivation, Winchell concluded with a summary of what he considered to be theistic bearings on the doctrine of evolution. In the end, Winchell stated that “in any issue of scientific investigation in a new development of truth, Christian Theism has nothing to fear, but only new truth to gain.”⁴¹ Liberally-minded theologians felt that as long as evolution did not imperil the “basic theistic conviction regarding the being and providence of a personal God,”⁴² it was not dangerous. Winchell further argued that the “so-called conflict between science and religion is partly fictitious, and partly a conflict between science and religious or ecclesiastical systems,”⁴³ and therefore there were no issues in seeing religion and science in complete harmony. It was not only science, and for that matter evolution, that sparked such debates within the Methodist community. By the twentieth century, a “bitter battle raged between conservatives and liberals

³⁶ Chiles, 51.

³⁷ Leland Howard Scott, “Methodist Theology in American in the 19th Century, Volume 1” (Ph.D. diss., Yale U, 1954), 335.

³⁸ Randolph Sinks Foster, “Origin of Species: An Examination of Darwinism,” *The Ingham Lectures: A Course of Lectures on the Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion Delivered before the Ohio Wesleyan University* (Cleveland: Ingham, Clarke and Company, 1872), 73-108.

³⁹ Foster, 106.

⁴⁰ Alexander Winchell, *The Doctrine of Evolution: Its Data, Its Principles, Its Speculations, and Its Theistic Bearings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 7.

⁴¹ Winchell, 123.

⁴² Scott, 338-339.

⁴³ Alexander Winchell, *Reconciliation of Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), iv. Winchell further argued in the Preface that systems of science and religion, approved by rational tests, must be found in complete harmony.

(Fundamentalists and Moderns) in the 1920s.”⁴⁴ Emory Stevens Bucke, in *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes* (1964), noted that the period between 1919 and 1934 was marked not only by debates over science, but also by “the dominance of evangelical liberalism throughout the United States, with small but vocal conservative and ‘fundamentalist’ reactions to this prevailing ethos.”⁴⁵

The dominance of this liberalism relied heavily on the theological leadership of such figures as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and their interpreters in America, William Newton Clarke and Lewis F. Stearns.⁴⁶ As Kenneth Cauthen, the John Price Crozer Griffith Professor Emeritus of Theology at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School found, there were two fundamental types of liberalism in America. He calls them “evangelical liberalism” and “modernistic liberalism.”⁴⁷ Cauthen suggests that the evangelical liberals were “serious Christians” who were searching for a theology which could serve “intelligent Moderns.” Evangelical liberals took greater confidence in Christian experience and “were convinced of the basic harmony between reason and experience, on one hand, and biblical revelation on the other hand.”⁴⁸

William Newton Clarke (1841-1912) was an early and influential proponent of religious modernism and liberalism. According to Clarke, what were fundamental to religion were not specific doctrines, which should be retained unaltered over the centuries, but instead religious experience. Reflective of this liberal trend at the beginning of the 1920s, every major liberal theologian in the Methodist Episcopal Church considered himself an evangelical liberal.⁴⁹ While their main goal was to retain the essentials of Christianity, these evangelical liberal theologians “were dedicated to reason, an open mind, and the currents of modernity.”⁵⁰ Thus, the 1920s saw a pervasive sense of change emerge that was tied up in modernism. Returning to the influence that men like Bowne had on Methodism, followers of Bowne, and men like him, “charted new paths for the Wesleyan tradition,” for they [the evangelical liberals] intended to remain true to the Wesleyan tradition, even if that required new interpretations.⁵¹ This new generation of theologians welcomed, as Langford argued, the spirit of the age, reflecting that the immanence of God was firmly established, and it was on this foundation that modern Christian interpretation emerged.

Like the larger liberal trend among the Methodist Episcopal Church, at Drew Theological Seminary, tendencies shifted toward a more liberal point

⁴⁴ John G. McEllhenney, ed., *United Methodism in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 112.

⁴⁵ William J. McCutcheon, “American Methodist Thought and Theology,” *The History of American Methodism*, vol. III, Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 261.

⁴⁶ McCutcheon, 263.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Cauthen, “Science and Theology: From Orthodoxy to Neo-Orthodoxy,” *Zygon* 1.3 (1966): 265.

⁴⁸ Cauthen, 265.

⁴⁹ Cauthen, 263.

⁵⁰ Cauthen, 264.

⁵¹ Langford, 181.

of view during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. For example, Robert William Rogers (1864-1930), Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis at Drew, delivered the Matriculation Day Address, "The Old Testament" in the seminary chapel, filled with students, alumni and friends on September 25, 1919. While it may not seem connected to the topic at hand, Rogers, in the address, noted that he had lived through three violent spasms of mingled fear and rage about the Old Testament: questions of geology, evolution and higher criticism. Rogers discussed, with respect to the geological controversies, the belief in a literal six-day creation, then the reconciliation of Genesis and geology through the acceptance that six days equals six aeons, and finally that the Bible was a book of religion, not of physical science, and that there was no destruction of its value through geological conclusions. He stated, "I did not see the beginnings of the next madness, which was the strange excitement over Evolution;" yet Rogers did see "enough of it never to be able to forget what I then experienced." He closed the discussion of evolution in his address by recounting that

the roar of discordant voices gradually died down and men of faith began to see that the Old Testament had suffered not in the least and preachers who were facing forward began to use the hypotheses of evolutionists as useful forms of exposition in setting forth the majesty and power and glory of our God.⁵²

The overall reaction to Rogers's Matriculation Day address was quite heated. L. W. Munhall and Charles Roads, editor and associate editor respectively, of the *Eastern Methodist* (a Methodist weekly periodical published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) wrote two very biting critiques of Rogers's views. Munhall aimed his comments directly at Rogers and extrapolated that Rogers's views represented the character of the teaching at Drew Theological Seminary at the time.⁵³ After attacking Rogers's adherence to the higher criticism and the new theological school, Munhall turned his attention to Rogers's comments on evolution. He wrote:

As to evolution being generally accepted, the claim is untrue; it has never been proven. At best it is but an hypothesis, un-sensible, unscientific, and un-Scriptural. I respectfully refer Dr. Rogers to "Collapse of Evolution," by Professor L. T. Townsend, D.D., S.T.D., M.V.I. And while about it, it would be well for him to read what Professor Townsend has had to say on the Genesis creation story.⁵⁴

Munhall next referred Rogers to the gentlemen who were once part of the Drew faculty; men whom he considered intellectual giants: Randolph S. Foster, John Fletcher Hurst, John McClintock, James Strong, G. R. Crooks, John Miley, S. F. Upham, and H. A. Buttz. What, Munhall argued, did the entire Drew faculty know about the Old Testament that those "intellectual giants" did not know? Munhall continued:

⁵² Robert William Rogers, "The Old Testament: An Address," Drew Theological Seminary, 1919. University Archives, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

⁵³ L. W. Munhall, "Drew Theological Seminary," *Eastern Methodist* 5.15 (October 7, 1920): 2.

⁵⁴ Munhall, 2.

I have no hesitation in saying that they knew as much about evolution . . . as Dr. Rogers, but they had grey matter enough in their heads to prevent them being carried away from demonstrable truth by the speculations and assumptions of rationalistic and infidel men, claiming to be wise above what is written.

But, as Munhall cried, “things are different at Drew now. How the mighty have fallen.”⁵⁵

Rogers was not the only faculty member at Drew to be criticized for his liberal point of view. Edwin Lewis (1881-1959) came to Drew Theological Seminary in 1916 as instructor of Greek Theology. Lewis became Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology at Drew in 1918 and later Professor from 1920 until his retirement in 1951. Lewis recommended that his students study the volumes of Knudson, Brightman, and Rall and felt that there was no better single volume available on theology than William Newton Clarke’s *Outline of Christian Theology*. Clarke was, as previously stated, a strong proponent of liberalism, and with this recommendation, Lewis was promoting an influential liberal point of view at Drew. Lewis’s career at Drew was filled with controversy. For example, in response to Lewis’s use of Clarke’s book in his Systematic Theology course, the Rev. G. W. Ridout, editor of *The Pentecostal Herald*, wrote, “This book, by a Baptist professor of the new theology school, has been the subject of severe criticism because of its unsoundness in fundamental doctrines.”⁵⁶ Similarly, the Rev. Harold P. Sloan, conservative minister and editor of the *Christian Advocate*, criticized Lewis for his liberal teachings. In his book, *A Christian Manifesto*, Lewis noted that “Modern theological liberalism undoubtedly rendered the church an important service . . . it served notice to a world too often skeptical that a man could believe in Jesus and at the same time be fully aware of all the amazing kaleidoscopic changes occurring in contemporary life.”⁵⁷

Competing Forces: Conservative *versus* Liberal of Modern

The dominance of liberalism within the Methodist Episcopal Church caused significant reactions from conservative leaders. At Drew, John Alfred Faulkner (1857-1931) was a hearty conservative who did not share the same points of view as men like Lewis. Faulkner, Professor of Church History at Drew Theological Seminary, chose to espouse his “polemics against what he thought was the modernizing of the church” in such vehicles as *The Christian Advocate* and *The Methodist Review*, arguing against the liberals on the denial of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and rejecting the universalism of Schleiermacher.⁵⁸ Harold Sloan, a pastor of the New Jersey Conference, also led the attack on liberals and liberalism. Due to what he believed to be the “intrusion” of liberal thought into the Conference Courses

⁵⁵ Munhall, 2.

⁵⁶ Rev. G. W. Ridout, “Submarine Attacks on the Old Ship of Zion,” *The Pentecostal Herald* Article X (May 25, 1921): 2.

⁵⁷ Thomas A. Langford, ed., *Practical Divinity, Volume 2: Readings in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 184-185.

⁵⁸ Bucke, *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*, Vol III, 268.

of Study, Sloan demanded an investigation of *and* amendment to the present Course of Study in 1920.⁵⁹ Thus, between 1924 and 1928, the conservatives within the Methodist Episcopal Church were consolidating their power over the Course of Study, but also attempting to face, head-on, the modernist trend, a trend they felt was “threatening Methodism as the Unitarian drive did Congregationalism a hundred years ago.”⁶⁰

Conservatives saw liberals, or moderns, as “subversives of the faith; liberals saw themselves as saviors of the essence of the faith.”⁶¹ So, due to the subversive nature of liberalism “conservative apologetics brought all religious, philosophical, and scientific developments under attack,” largely due to the “extent to which Methodism was dominated by liberalism in the first third of the twentieth century.”⁶² It was an extension of the conservative fear of liberalism and modernism that led to the heresy charges brought against Lynn Harold Hough and William H. Phelps.

Hough’s Sermon on Darwin, Evolution, and the Christian Religion— and Its Aftermath

On Sunday, June 21, 1925, Hough preached his evening sermon at the Central Methodist Episcopal Church of Detroit. In this sermon, entitled, “Charles Darwin, Evolution, and the Christian Religion,” Hough began with a passage from 1 Corinthians 15:46; “That is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural.” He introduced Darwin into the sermon by noting that, “The year 1809 was perhaps the greatest year of distinguished births which the nineteenth century produced,” as it was the year of Darwin’s birth. Hough stated that Darwin was not the originator of the idea of evolution, but that he had subjected “the idea of evolution to such scientific tests as had been unknown before.” Turning to Herbert Spencer, Hough next noted that:

[I]t was Herbert Spencer who, independently of Darwin, set the whole structure of the cosmos in the perspective of evolutionary thought. Every science and every art has felt the stimulus of this approach, and it is not too much to say that evolution has become not so much an explanation as a method, which makes a place for itself in every sort of investigation and a spirit which suffuses all our thinking.⁶³

Hough then addressed the conflicts that arose after the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), two books that “precipitated the most acrimonious sort of controversy.” The sermon further discussed the idea of seeing the process of evolution in very specific terms:

Is evolution a self-sufficient and self-running process, without any place for moral

⁵⁹ Bucke, 270.

⁶⁰ Bucke, 271.

⁶¹ McEllhenney, 112.

⁶² Chiles, 71.

⁶³ Lynn Harold Hough, “Charles Darwin, Evolution and Christianity” (June 21, 1925), Lynn Harold Hough Papers, Box 1 Folder 3, University Archives, Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey.

and spiritual values and without any place for Almighty God, or is it the perpetual activity of the perfectly good and loving Father whose face we see in the face of Jesus Christ? Here the issue is sharp and clear enough.

Hough argued that the man who answers the question about the relationship between Christianity and evolution in the first way is *not a Christian*. The man who answers the question in the second way “does not cease to be a Christian, though he is a firm believer in evolution as the chosen method by which God works.”⁶⁴

Thus, for Hough, a Christian who believed in the process of evolution as the work of God’s hand setting the process in motion, was a perfectly good, orthodox Christian. He closed the sermon by reiterating “it is He who brings to light the divine fellowship which has been implicit in the whole evolutionary process. It is in *Him* that the new knowledge becomes redemptive and science itself the joyous handmaid of religion.”⁶⁵

Soon after delivering his sermon, Hough quit his church in Detroit and traveled to the United Kingdom for the summer. He had been invited to give, at the British Wesleyan Conference (an annual Methodist meeting), the Fernley Lecture in 1925 which he entitled “Evangelical Humanism.” This gathering was, according to Hough, the “Mother Conference of Worldwide Methodism,” and would, therefore, expose his ideas on evolution and Christianity to a wider audience.⁶⁶ A copy of the sermon Hough gave in Detroit on evolution was published in *The Christian World Pulpit*, a periodical based in England with a readership of mostly clergy, on July 23, 1925, just a few days after the close of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Hough’s sermon seems to have not garnered much attention.

William H. Phelps and Lynn Harold Hough: Perfect Together?

In advance of his publication of Hough’s sermon on evolution and in response to the outcome of the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, William H. Phelps, the editor of *The Michigan Christian Advocate*, wrote a call to arms for Methodists entitled, “To Think Without Confusion, Clearly.” In this essay, Phelps noted several important issues that his readership should contemplate in light of the Scopes Trial: “Protestantism is committed to the conviction that it is the truth that is to make us free, and we dare to follow it anywhere, believing that it will lead us to Christ,” and, “No real Protestant is ever afraid of a real scientist . . . and is eager for some new adventure down deep into the mine of some new truth.”⁶⁷

Phelps argued that the conviction of John T. Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, was cause for some “careful thinking on the part of every one of us.” He

⁶⁴ Hough, “Charles Darwin, Evolution and Christianity.”

⁶⁵ Hough, “Charles Darwin, Evolution and Christianity.”

⁶⁶ Letter from Hough to unidentified individual, Manchester, England (July 27, 1925); Lynn Harold Hough Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, University Archives, Drew University Library Madison, New Jersey.

⁶⁷ William H. Phelps, “To Think Without Confusion, Clearly,” *The Michigan Christian Advocate* 52.30 (July 30, 1925): 1.

later called for Methodists to “begin to use evolution a bit instead of abusing the scientists!” and to “welcome every hand, scientific or theological, that offers to help us enthrone Christ.”⁶⁸ Methodists could be evolutionists *and* Christians, simply by following the liberal point of view of evolution through a Christian interpretation. Phelps’s position, like Hough’s, was to embrace evolution within Christian theology, not further to widen the chasm between religion and science.

To justify his position in the so-called battle between science and religion, Phelps re-published Hough’s June 21st sermon in the *Michigan Christian Advocate* on August 20, 1925. The dates of presentation and publication are significant here, for the first appearance of the sermon in published form was soon after the Scopes trial had ended, and it was read among clergy in Britain. However, this later appearance, in an American periodical with a wider reader base, occurred after both the close of the Scopes trial AND the death of William Jennings Bryan on July 26, 1925. Phelps and Hough would both be thrust into the battle for their promotion of such ideas.

On Dangerous Ground: Formal Charges of Heresy

Almost one month later, on Monday, August 31, 1925, formal charges were brought forth against Lynn Harold Hough and William H. Phelps and filed with Dr. E. J. Warren of the Detroit Conference. Hough was charged due to his sermon, while Phelps was charged because he published said sermon and “because he quoted John Wesley to prove that Methodists need not fear the evolutionary theory.”⁶⁹ The Reverend Dr. Levi Bird, a supernumerary preacher⁷⁰ acting as the pastor of the Methodist Church in Port Sanilac, Michigan, and also a member of the Detroit Conference, was the instigator of the twenty-seven charges against Hough. He ultimately charged Hough with:

disseminating doctrines and teachings that are subversive of the doctrines and teachings of the holy scriptures, which teachings if continued from our pulpits will destroy the whole spiritual intent . . . and doctrinal teachings of the great Methodist Church . . .⁷¹

Bird also charged Hough with “insulting God and outraging the moral sense of the whole Methodist church and the Detroit conference,” and asserted in Charge 27 “on the authority of God and Heaven that evolution is the last assault of the devil on the divinity of Jesus Christ in order to destroy the faith once delivered to the saints, and cause the church of God to perish

⁶⁸ Phelps, 1.

⁶⁹ “Dr. Hough Charged with Heresy,” *The Christian Century* (September 10, 1925): 1126.

⁷⁰ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1922), ¶189. A supernumerary preacher is one who is so disabled by affliction as to be unable to preach constantly, but who is willing to do any work in the ministry which the Bishop may direct, and he may be able to perform.

⁷¹ Earl Cranston, “Dr. Hough Charged with Heresy,” *The Christian Century* (September 10, 1925): 1126.

from the Earth.”⁷² Thus, Bird did not only see Hough’s sermon as dangerous for its alignment of science and religion, but also because he saw the damage that such teachings could inflict on religion in general. According to the *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1924):

[I]f a member of an Annual Conference . . . be accused of any violation of the moral law, his District Superintendent, or the Superintendent of the District within the bounds of which such acts have alleged to have taken place, shall call not less than five nor more than nine members of the Annual Conference to investigate the same, and, if possible, bring the accused and accuser face to face.⁷³

Thus, the Methodist Episcopal Church was prompted to respond to the heresy charges against Lynn Harold Hough and William H. Phelps brought forward by the Reverend Bird. According to Methodist law, once charges have been formally filed, the district superintendents have no option but to address said charges.

Despite Bird’s disdain, other responses to Hough’s sermon, it seems, were not all negative. In a September 2, 1925, article in the *Detroit Free Press*, it was noted that

Fifty copies of the *Christian World Pulpit*, an English religious weekly, bearing the date of July 23, were mailed recently by Dr. Lynn Harold Hough, pastor of the Central Methodist Church, to his office in Detroit to satisfy requests for copies of his sermon on “Charles Darwin, Evolution and the Christian Religion.”

The article further mentioned that as a result of the heresy charges, congregants who agreed with the views of Hough recalled the enthusiasm with which the sermon was received locally. The sermon was broadcast live on WCX radio (the radio vehicle of *The Detroit Free Press*) the night it was delivered and the station “received many telephone calls at that time expressive of the gratification caused by the sermon and its message.”⁷⁴ These calls came from both from the local Detroit area and also the surrounding outlying communities, revealing that Hough’s message reached a wider audience than his church membership and that many in the region were sympathetic to his views on the relationship between religion and science.

Facing the Charges

On the eve of the meeting of the Detroit Annual Conference, a Special Committee was established to investigate the charges brought against Hough by Bird. The Committee of Five⁷⁵ met at eight o’clock on September 15, 1925, at the Central Methodist Church in Flint, Michigan, to review the charges. Bird was present to prosecute, while Hough, who had been invited

⁷² Cranston, 1126.

⁷³ 1925, p. 199.

⁷⁴ “Hough Sermon is in Demand. Evolution Discourse, Basis of Heresy Charges, Has Received Much Praise,” *Detroit Free Press* (September 2, 1925).

⁷⁵ The Committee consisted of Howard A. Field, Weldon F. Crossland, Hartley Cansfield, W. R. Fruit, and E. F. Dunlavy (*Detroit Annual Conference Journal*, The Seventieth Session, Flint, Michigan, [September 16-21, 1925]: 190-191).

to give the Fernley Lecture for 1925 in England, was not able to be present; he was to remain in England until September 19, 1925. Due to his absence, Hough was represented by Dr. George Elliott, editor of the *Methodist Review*. And, although the Committee was reticent to have the press present at the meeting, Bird demanded that there be coverage by the media, and the Committee reluctantly agreed.

According to an article published by the *Baltimore American*, Bird “took exception to two recent sermons by Dr. Hough in which the latter was alleged to have placed Jesus Christ and Charles Darwin on [*sic*] an equality.” Hough was also accused by Bird of “assailing the integrity of the Scriptures and . . . making of God a liar.” The article further noted that Bird “declared he had received a call from God to preach against the encroachments of the evolutionary theory upon religion and told of a vision he had received in which God had shown him that the doctrine of evolution was going to split the church in two.”⁷⁶ It seems that Bird’s charges were not brought forward against Hough and Phelps personally, but in response to the conservative backlash against liberalism in the faith, particularly in the case of the acceptance of evolutionary theory.

Lynn Harold Hough’s sermon was delivered at a critical moment in American history, with respect to the battle between science and religion. The Scopes “Monkey” Trial had begun in Dayton, Tennessee, on July 10, 1925, ending on July 21, 1925 with the conviction of John T. Scopes. Bird felt, just as William Jennings Bryan had in the Scopes Trial, that he needed to “fight the teachers of evolution” for if not, the “end of the world might come within five years if the Dr. Houghs did not repent of their evolutionary views.”⁷⁷ In defense of Hough, Elliott charged Bird with “attacking the theory of evolution instead of Dr. Hough’s sermon.”⁷⁸

Unlike Dayton, however, the charges against Hough and Phelps would not lead to a trial. As reported in the *Michigan Christian Advocate* on September 24, 1925, the Business Session of the Detroit Conference heard the call of Question 14, the heresy report. After careful consideration, the committee, consisting of Edgar J. Warren as Chairman, Weldon Crossland as Secretary, Hartley Cansfield, W. R. Fruit, and Howard A. Field recommended that the Detroit Conference refuse to entertain said charges. When the conference received the report, it is stated that they responded with “loud and prolonged cheering.”⁷⁹ Reasons for the dismissal of the charges stem from the esteemed position that Hough held within the church and the high regard for his thinking.⁸⁰ In contrast, Bird was seen as a fanatic who had visions from God that

⁷⁶ “Dr. Hough Wins in Heresy Case,” *Baltimore American* (Sept. 17, 1925).

⁷⁷ “A Great Heresy Case,” clip from unknown periodical, Lynn Harold Hough Papers, Box 1 Folder 3, University Archives, Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey.

⁷⁸ “Dr. Hough Wins in Heresy Case.”

⁷⁹ Gordon Phillips, “Detroit Conference,” *Michigan Christian Advocate* (September 24, 1925): 2.

⁸⁰ See “A Salutory Experience for the Methodists,” *The Christian Century*, 42.37 (September 10, 1925): 1112.

led him to make his accusations against Hough.⁸¹ Articles in *The Christian Century*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Washington Herald*, *The Virginian Pilot*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Baltimore American* covered the heresy proceedings and supported Hough over Bird. As a journalist from the *Washington Herald* noted, “With a wisdom that is rare in these days of strife over creeds and dogma, the Methodist Episcopal Synod, of Michigan, has decided not to put on trial the Rev. Lynn H. Hough, eminent Detroit pastor and former head of Northwestern University, on charges of heresy.”⁸² Phelps was cleared of the heresy charges brought forward by Bird at the annual Michigan Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church on September 9, 1925.

Placing the Hough Heresy Case into Historical Context

Despite the rejection of formal proceedings against Hough and Phelps, the battle raged on between science and religion in America. The Hough heresy case represents a clear attempt by conservative ministers to jump on the anti-evolution and anti-modernism bandwagon. However, in the end, the Levi Bird’s charges made little headway in stopping, stalling, or even discrediting Hough’s position as a theological evolutionist. As Eugenie Carol Scott noted in her book, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction* (2004), “in the beginning of the twentieth century it is Charles Robert Darwin who still stands out as the towering nineteenth-century intellectual figure who still gives modern society fits.”⁸³

Between the years 1925 and 1968, attempts to limit the teaching of evolution continued to be presented before state legislatures, but few were ultimately passed. Mississippi passed an anti-evolution bill in 1926, but by 1927, efforts to halt evolution’s progress failed in eleven states, more importantly in all states in which they were introduced. Conversely, in November, 1928, Arkansas voters approved Anti-Evolution Initiative Act 1 on their ballot.

By the end of the 1920s, not all theologians (reflective of Hough’s position) were against the teaching of evolution, or believed that Christians could not be evolutionists. For example, the Rev. C. W. Wilmer, Dean of the Theological School of the University of the South, argued that “the Church must render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and also unto science those things that belong to science . . . it is for scientists and not civil legislatures to say what is science . . .”⁸⁴ However, as progressive as some liberal theologians were, as Peter J. Bowler has discussed in his book, *Reconciling Science and Religion* (2001), “not everyone accepted the proposed synthe-

⁸¹ “A Great Heresy Case.”

⁸² “Heresy Trial Averted,” clip from the *Washington Herald* (September 18, 1925).

⁸³ Eugenie C. Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004), ix.

⁸⁴ S. J. Holmes “Proposed Laws against the Teaching of Evolution,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 13.8 (December, 1927): 550.

sis of science and religion.”⁸⁵ Attacks were mounted on both scientists and theologians who dared to suggest there could be a synthesis. For example, Bishop Francis J. McConnell (1871-1953), who presided over the 1925 Detroit Conference, was frequently brought up on heresy charges for his liberal point of view. As one can see, for every person who accepted reconciliation between science and religion, there were those that could never see any union.

Conclusion

The battle over science and religion continues to this day. While cases against evolution slowed in the years after the Scopes Trial, several monumental decisions in American jurisprudence reveal that the battlefield remains: *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968), *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987) and *Kitzmiller v. Dover* (2005). After 86 years, fundamentalists and conservative main-line Protestants still see both liberalism and evolutionism as dangerous to the faith. The American public also reflects a more conservative trend with respect to evolution. A 2006 article published in *Science* revealed that:

After 20 years of public debate, the percentage of U.S. adults accepting the idea of evolution has declined from 45% to 40% and the percentage of adults overtly rejecting evolution declined from 48% to 39%. The percentage of adults who were not sure about evolution increased from 7% in 1985 to 21% in 2005.⁸⁶

It is clear that the debate over science and religion still remains.

However, there are those, like Hough, who wish to deflate the conflict. The Clergy Letter Project, begun by Dr. Michael Zimmerman, Professor of Biology at Butler University in 2004, aims to bring together clergy and scientists in an effort to show that “numerous clergy from most denominations have tremendous respect for evolutionary theory and have embraced it as a core component of human knowledge, fully harmonious with religious faith.”⁸⁷ The project supports, every Sunday near Darwin’s birthday (February 12), “Evolution Sunday.” Through sermons, discussion groups, meaningful conversations and seminars, the leaders participating in said events hope to show that religion and science are not adversaries.

Recent attempts, like the Clergy Letter Project, to overcome the debate over the warfare between science and religion, from a theological point of view, might have pleased Hough greatly. Hough saw that the only way to keep Christianity relevant in modern American society was to reform its stance on pressing matters, allowing for the incorporation of science within religion.

Through the lens of the heresy trial of Lynn Harold Hough, we can imag-

⁸⁵ Peter J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 3.

⁸⁶ Jon D. Miller, Eugenie C. Scott and Shinji Okamoto, “Pubic Acceptance of Evolution,” *Science*, New Series, 313.5788 (August 11, 2006), 765-766.

⁸⁷ Michael Zimmerman, “The Clergy Letter Project-Background,” online, accessed August 7, 2007. <http://www.theclergyletterproject.net/>.

ine a new way of looking at the continued conflict between science and religion over the subject of evolution in America. Hough, in his time, saw no such conflict between Christianity and evolution, as long as evolution was explained as the work of God. When theologians were split over this issue, especially in the American South, what is striking about the Hough case is both its locality and its outcome. For historians of religion, historians of science, and those interested in the history of the conflict between science and religion, an investigation of the Hough heresy case provides a fresh perspective on the debate over science and religion in America. With most of the attention centered on the fundamentalist and conservative backlash against liberalism and evolution during the early decades of the twentieth century, this narrative history of a different kind, that of more moderate reactions to modernity and an incorporation of evolution into theological understandings of who we are, provides an alternative model.

Renewed examinations of the work of men like Abbott, Fiske, Bowne, Rogers, Winchell, Curtis, Lewis, and Hough, while ignored by historians of science, afford opportunities to tell of changing perspectives in American life and religion that are not so polarized. Finally, in light of all of the attention given to the Scopes Trial in July, 1925, the trial of Hough was, and still is, largely ignored by historians of religion and of science, and is an impetus for further study.