

THE ENGLISH METHODIST RESPONSE TO DARWIN RECONSIDERED

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Introduction

Contrary to the popular view articulated by E. Brooks Holifield that Darwin's work caused little stir in British Wesleyan circles, the aim of this paper is to document abundant evidence of a wide-ranging interdisciplinary debate. My argument will be based on a critical analysis of commentary on Darwin and Darwin-related issues from 1860 to 1888 in *The London Quarterly Review*, the chief scholarly journal of Wesleyan Methodism.

The Age of Victorian Unbelief

William Strawson notes in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* the rich intellectual tradition of nineteenth-century Methodism: "Nineteenth Century Methodists knew what the challenge was and they bent their energy to meeting it . . . by full-scale attacks on the prevalent atheism and skepticism of contemporary intellectual society."¹ Illustrative of this intellectual and spiritual ferment was a controversy not between religion and science per se but between the "old" science and the "new." Characteristic of the former was the harmonization of religious and scientific truth and theory. Typical of the latter was the challenge of a literal interpretation of creation in Genesis by use of developments in geology, physics and biology. Reflected in this debate were tensions between the church and an emerging community of professional scientists.

The tidy world of natural theology was not disrupted until 1830 when Charles Lyell published his *Principles of Geology*. Lyell's work reformed geology and called into question biblical accounts of creation by positing that the geological calendar "stretched back further than had ever been imagined."² Nearly three decades later Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Darwin, too, offered a direct challenge to the biblical version of divinely created species. His theory rested upon the principle of natural selection "that 'random' changes occur in some of the young of a given species, some of the changes turn out to be more suited to survival and vigour in the given environment, and those

¹Davies, George, Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* 4 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1965-1988), vol. 3, 188.

²Davies et al., vol. 3, 201.

animals that have them thus tend to live longer and reproduce more than the rest, which sooner or later become extinct.”³ Importantly, Darwin’s theory received support from Lyell’s geological time-frame which provided more time for natural selection than the biblical account of creation.

“New” science, therefore, threatened the traditional Christian and biblical understanding of creation and human nature. Not only had humans not originated from one pair of parents in one place but the race had begun from a “lower” species. Thus, a state of perfection and fall, the need of a Savior, the rite of baptism, supernatural destiny and the argument from design were annulled.⁴

The *London Quarterly Review* responded to all of these challenges including the age of the earth, fixity of species, human nature and the traditional Paleyan argument from design. At various points Common Sense Philosophy was employed in the defense of scripture and the design argument. Also, the *Review* associated Darwin and evolution with a host of doctrines and schools referred to as “free thinking,” “modern thought,” “unsound thought,” “atheism,” “heresies,” and “unbelief.” Thus, an article attacking materialism may also have been conceived as a response to Darwin even though Darwin may not be mentioned by name. This paper will seek to identify when such articles may be appropriately considered responses to Darwin. To ignore such “indirect” attacks on him would be to fail to perceive much of the response to him.

The Holifield Thesis

In an article entitled, “The English Methodist Response to Darwin” published in 1972 in *Methodist History*, E. Brooks Holifield maintains that the chief concern of English Victorian Methodists with regard to Darwinism was to “safeguard the dignity of man, particularly his capacity for moral agency.”⁵

Holifield’s thesis is that, because of an anthropocentric tendency in their theology and ethics, Methodists paid little attention to the implications of Darwin for scriptural authority and the theology of creation. Such comments as “the biblical issue appeared very infrequently in Methodist discussions of Darwin” and “in so far as Methodists were seriously disturbed by Darwinism, the main source of their disquietude was its anthropological implications”⁶ fail to account for the richness and diversity of the Methodist response found in the pages of *The London Quarterly Review*. Holifield even goes so far as to say that the English Methodist intellectual journals failed to find any cause for alarm in Darwin and that

³Davies et al., vol. 3, 202, 203.

⁴Davies et al., vol. 3, 204.

⁵E. Brooks Holifield, “The English Methodist Response to Darwin,” *Methodist History* (January 1972), 14.

⁶Holifield, 14.

the *Review* other than a critique on the *Origin of Species* in 1861 had “little else to say” about Darwin until an 1875 minor essay on the *Descent of Man*.⁷

In fact, the *Review* had much to say. And what it said reflected not a single focus on the “dignity of man” but a clearly articulated defense of scripture and the argument of creation by design. In addition, Holifield makes no mention of the vigorous attack “on the prevalent atheism and skepticism of contemporary intellectual society” by Methodists. Indeed, Darwinism not only had an affinity with but provided ideological support for many of these modern doctrines. Holifield’s eagerness to use the Darwinian debates to demonstrate the “remarkably anthropocentric theological orientation” of Victorian Methodists leads him to make inaccurate judgments about the Methodist perception of and response to Darwin. Such judgments unfortunately risk perpetuating what William Strawson has termed a tendency in recent years to see the business of Methodism as “preaching a simple gospel, which often takes no account of the problems and doubts assailing their contemporaries” and the perception of Victorian religion as “self-satisfied” and “unaware of the crisis in Christianity.”⁸

The London Quarterly Review and Darwinism

The object of Wesleyan books and magazines was to educate as well as to defend.⁹ Therefore, as Wesleyan Methodists became upwardly mobile in Victorian society, Methodist publications widened their scope to more general interests, yet preserved a Wesleyan view of all that took place in the culture itself.¹⁰

In 1840, James Harrison Rigg lobbied in *The Watchman* for a journal that would protect Wesleyan interests: “surely there ought to be a Wesleyan Review to lie on the tables of our libraries . . . [, we are] ashamed that there has not been one long since.”¹¹ By 1853, with financial help from his brother, Rigg founded *The Review*. Its purpose was to “defend Methodist doctrines and systems.”¹² That it succeeded in this goal was commonly accepted.¹³ Even from this century it is recalled as “the principal organ of Methodist higher theological education”¹⁴ in Britain.

⁷Holifield, 14.

⁸Davies, George, Rupp, *A History of the Methodist Church In Great Britain*, 4 vols. (London: Epworth, 1965–88), 182.

⁹Davies et al., vol. 3, 165.

¹⁰Davies et al., vol. 3, 165.

¹¹John Telford, *The Life of J. H. Rigg D.D.* (London: Culley, 1909), 19.

¹²William Strawson, “The London Quarterly and Holborn Review.” *Church Quarterly* vol. 1, 1968, 42.

¹³Strawson, 42.

¹⁴Francis Cumbers, *The Book Room* (London: Epworth, 1956), 64.

During the period 1860 to 1888 *The London Quarterly Review* published major and minor reviews of books representing a vast spectrum of cultural interests including agriculture, science, music, language, biblical studies, ecclesiastical and secular politics, and mission activity. Minor reviews were one to five pages in length, while major reviews often spanned fifty or more pages and included in-depth commentary on books, issues and themes under consideration.

Of 112 issues of *The London Quarterly Review* over a period of twenty-eight years, sixty articles dealt with science and religion and/or “modern thought” and religion. Thirty of these were major reviews which offered analysis of works under scrutiny as well as their general subject matter. The remaining thirty articles were minor reviews or articles appearing in the section entitled “Literary Notices.” Most of the sixty articles addressed more than one discipline or subject matter as indicated in the chart below.

Using Holifield’s time-frame from 1860 to 1875 (the later date being actually the second not, as Holifield says, the first and only review of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*) during which, says Holifield, *The London Quarterly Review* “had little else to say about Darwin,” the frequency of religion and science subject matter in major and minor reviews was often and regular:

subject matter	major review		minor review	
	1860-75	1876-88	1860-75	1876-88
biology	7	4	11	5
geology	4	5	6	4
physics	2	0	2	0
“modern thought”/Bible	3	9	12	3
B.A.A.S.*	1	0	0	0
references to:				
Darwin/natural selection	8	10	9	3
Scriptural authority	7	6	10	8
design argument	8	11	4	2
TOTAL	40	45	54	25

*British Association for the Advancement of Science

From 1875 to 1888, the frequency of religion and science as subject matter in the *Review* remained constant with earlier figures. From 1860 to 1888, on an average, every other issue of *The London Quarterly Review* dealt in some fashion with religion and science or religion and “modern thought.” Through this period eighteen major and twelve minor review articles referred directly to Darwin or natural selection. Indeed, *The London Quarterly Review* was wide awake to the central debates of the age. Far from “having little else to say” it is difficult to imagine that the editors of what was billed as a journal of wide-ranging cultural critique

and theological commentary could have devoted any more space to such issues than they did!

But what was said? Several patterns of perception and response to Darwin are evident from 1860 to 1888. In general, the *Review* moves from a strongly held anti-Darwin position in its 1860 analysis of the *Origin of Species* to a more accommodationist position on Darwin by 1888. Nevertheless, even by 1888 the *Review* was unable to accept natural selection and the geological time table needed for it. Typically, the *Review* used proponents of the “old” science (argument from design), biblical cosmogony, and Common Sense Philosophy to refute the claims of Darwin and “new” science. Such writers as J. W. Dawson, T. R. Birks, James McCosh, and even Newton, Herschel, and Paley were favorites of the *Review* and were frequently cited in contradistinction to Darwin, Lyell, Tyndall, Huxley, Spencer, and Thomson.

In general, defense of the argument from design and Scriptural authority received about equal attention. Interestingly, the defense of the “dignity of man” which Holifield claims is Methodism’s primary concern regarding Darwinism does not command the same degree of attention.

Objections to Darwin

Objections of the *Review* to Darwin’s theories fall into several categories: the contradiction of evolution with the biblical record and design argument; the absence of “facts” to support his theories, especially geological evidence; evolution as threat to the dignity of humans; and Darwinism as intellectually linked to philosophical heresies of the day. These arguments are made throughout nearly three decades following publication of the *Origin of Species*.

(1) *Defending the Biblical Record and Theological Doctrine*

The most blatant challenge of Darwin’s theory was to the biblical account of creation. The response of the *Review* was threefold. First, it asserted the absolute truth and authority of the biblical record. Second, it posited that scientific truth ultimately harmonizes with scriptural truth. And, third, it advocated the durability of biblical truths over what it charged were the recent and fleeting discoveries of the “new” science.

In a series of assertions from the early sixties to the late seventies the *Review* claimed, in diverse ways, the truth of the biblical record. In 1862, responding to a work by T. R. Birks which defended the Bible against “modern thought,” including the “attack” upon the authority of the Genesis account of creation, the divine inspiration of scripture was noted as the foundation of Birks’ thesis and was endorsed by the *Review* as an incisive, cogent argument.¹⁵

¹⁵“Brief Literary Notices,” *London Quarterly Review* (Cited hereafter as *LQR*) vol. 18, 1862, 265 (full article, 261–266).

An 1866 review of four works on geology, including Lyell's *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man*, identified the inconsistency of the biblical record of creation with "new" science: "the cosmogony and chronology of Holy Scripture have been supposed to look unfavorably upon what are affirmed to be the plain and straightforward readings of the newly-discovered scientific phenomena."¹⁶

By 1869, the defense of Scripture had become confrontational and hard-nosed. In an analysis of geological works by Lyell and S. I. Murchison, the *Review* announced that "the question in dispute is not 'Is the Bible given to teach science?' but 'Is the first chapter of the Bible a true history of the creation?'" the latter of which the *Review* went on to eloquently defend.¹⁷ Finally, an 1877 article entitled, "The Book of Genesis and Science," concluded that once the Bible had withstood the test of contemporary controversies even modern scientists would perceive it to be an "honest chronicle" and the "finger of God."¹⁸

In addition to asserting the literal truth of the Bible, the *Review* adamantly held to the basic tenet of natural theology that ultimately the facts of science would harmonize with those of scripture. Such statements appear in virtually every article dealing with scripture and science from the early sixties well into the eighties. For example, a work which refuted the implied contradictions of modern science with the Mosaic cosmogony received notice. "The great argument of the book . . . is the removal of apparent discrepancies between scripture and science . . . we may boldly affirm, that even to suspect that Scripture and science are opposed to each other is unphilosophical."¹⁹ The grounds for such a harmony of God's word and works was found in the metaphysical propositions of Common Sense Philosophy.

Finally, frustrated with disrespect for the biblical view of creation, the *Review* occasionally lashed out by quoting from Job or the Psalms about the majesty of God or simply stated the ineptitude of science to compete, in the pursuit of truth, with scripture. "The science of the future," an 1877 article said, "will be powerless to supersede [Scripture]."²⁰

(2) *The Design Argument*

The primary theological doctrine which the Darwinian hypothesis challenged was, of course, the argument from design to Designer. This theological "proof" for the existence of God can be traced to Aquinas' teleological arguments but became popularized in English thought and culture through the work of William Paley whose *Evidences of Christianity*

¹⁶"Article V," *LQR* vol. 27, 1866, 400 (full article, 385-426).

¹⁷"Article IV," *LQR* vol. 32, 1869, 359 (full article, 358-378).

¹⁸"Article III," *LQR* vol. 48, 1877, 60 (full article, 52-66).

¹⁹"Brief Literary Notices," *LQR* vol. 27, 1866, 246 (full article, 245-246).

²⁰"Article III," *LQR* vol. 48, 1877, 59.

(1802) became the bible of natural theology. The argument from design supports the existence of a Designer based on the orderly works of nature. Charles Coulston Gillispie in *Genesis and Geology* (1951) proposes that nothing less than the stability of society depended on the maintenance of the natural theology world-view. If the role of God as the Designer and Overseer of the cosmos was whittled away, many feared, such a God would also be displaced as the source and guide of moral life.²¹ Darwin's theories threatened natural theology because the doctrine of "survival of the fittest" suggested a state of moral disorder in nature. Natural selection was perceived to be based on "fortuitous" variations favoring the survival of some species and not others.

Examples of the defense and use of the argument from design to combat Darwin's theory of evolution abound in the *Review*. Significantly, however, the argument after 1877 seems to be used as a way to accommodate or modify Darwin's ideas.

The pre-accommodationist approach can be seen in a lengthy 1871 review of eleven publications: three by Darwin (*Descent of Man*, *Origin of Species*, and *Variation of Animals*), three works by Tyndall on energy, and one by Tait on thermodynamics. The *Review* claimed Darwin's intention in the works under study was to "eliminate" the argument from design;²² it suggested that to regard the human eye as a product of natural selection is absurd;²³ it held that "sound" (Common Sense) philosophy teaches design;²⁴ and even invoked the cosmogonies of Newton²⁵ and elsewhere Paley²⁶ in refuting the teachings of modern or "new" science.

After 1877, however, a more concerted attempt was made to co-opt Darwin's theories by seeing in them evidence of design. Representative of this shift in response to Darwin is the 1877 review of two studies by Darwin dealing with self-fertilization in vegetables and fertilization of orchids by insects.

There is a sublime capacity in nature to adjust itself to varying conditions, and amidst all variations to preserve concurrent adaptation — to balance the details of design . . . thus, instead of the device of an artificer, the great Creator has vested vital forms not only with a rigid precision adjustment and adaptation to present circumstances . . . and thus indicates the presence and constant action of a great and unsearchable, but benevolent Spirit.²⁷

²¹Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Genesis and Geology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 227.

²²"The Heresies of Science," *LQR* vol. 37 (full article, 275–309), 275.

²³"Heresies of Science," 276.

²⁴"Heresies of Science," 288.

²⁵"Heresies of Science," 294.

²⁶For example, Paley's cosmogony is cited in *LQR* vols. 44, 1875, 113 and 57, 1881, 388.

²⁷"Literary Notices: Works by Mr. Darwin," *LQR* vol. 52, 1877, 527 (full article, 523–527).

From this point on, the *Review* most often takes an accommodationist stance with regard to Darwin's ideas.²⁸

(3) *Darwin and Geology*

As far as the *Review* was concerned, Darwin and Lyell were cut out of the same cloth. Lyell's work on the age of the earth and the antiquity of human life was seen as providing crucial "new" scientific support for the theories of Darwin which themselves required a much older earth than permitted by the biblical record. It was important, therefore, in the refutation of Darwin also to refute Lyell's geological conclusions. Examples of the identification of Darwin and Lyell as kindred intellectual spirits appear often. As early as 1863,²⁹ again in 1872³⁰ and once more in 1874³¹ are instances of Lyell's support for Darwin. The 1872 article, for instance, lumped Lyell and Darwin with one broad stroke: "the views of each of the prominent supporters of Darwin [including Lyell] are considered . . . and the absolute acceptance of the doctrine of evolution by Lyell, are reviewed."

Challenges to the "new" geology show up regularly elsewhere; especially in three major reviews of Lyell's dating of the earth by the "peat calendar" and the division of civilization into "stone, bronze and iron ages."³² An attack on Lyell was an attack on Darwin.

(4) *Dignity of Humans*

Holifield claims that defense of the "dignity of humans" was the primary, perhaps only, response of Methodism to evolution. Evidence of this concern is easily found in the pages of the *Review* but not as commonly, for example, as the defense of scripture and natural theology. Nevertheless, the *Review* noted early and late in the twenty-eight year period under consideration, the physical, intellectual and moral differences between human and "brute."

For instance, in a report on the 1862 meeting of the British Association at Cambridge, the *Review* pointed up that the human brain is larger and therefore different in kind from that of a gorilla;³³ that humans are morally and intellectually superior to the monkey;³⁴ and heralding human intelligence offered a wonderful description of humans as "ballooning"

²⁸For example, accommodating positions can be identified in *LQR* vols. 54, 1880, 14; 56, 1881, 274; and 57, 1881, 372-374.

²⁹"Article I," *LQR* vol. 20, 1863, 302 (full article, 271-304).

³⁰"Literary Notices," *LQR* vol. 39, 1872, 256 (full article, 254-256).

³¹"Article II," *LQR* vol. 42, 1874, 39 (full article, 28-48).

³²"Article I," *LQR* vol. 20, 1863, 302; "Article VII," *LQR* vol. 37, 1871 (full article, 176, 199); "Article II," *LQR* vol. 42, 1874.

³³"Article IV: The British Association at Cambridge," *LQR* vol. 19, 1862, 363 (full article, 362-392).

³⁴"Article, IV," vol. 19, 365.

animals, meaning that humans invented and have found diverse creative use for the hot air balloon.³⁵ More in depth attempts to demonstrate the uniqueness of the human species and the existence of a Creator show up in a major article in 1875 (vol. 44) on conscience which leads off by refuting Darwin's suggestion that conscience is "self-sufficient"³⁶ and counters by saying that conscience requires a Creator to explain its function and existence.

(5) *Darwin and Modern Thought*

Surrounding the debate between theories of the "old" and "new" sciences (especially following publications by Huxley and Spencer in the late 1870s dealing with the role of science in society and the progress of civilization) was the debate between the theologies and philosophies of the "old" and "new" sciences. Biblical and theological support was used to bolster the "old" science in its debate with the "new" scientific theories. Metaphysical conclusions were extrapolated from the "new" beliefs. Therefore, the debate reflecting the tensions between the "old" and "new" sciences was inter-disciplinary as well as intra-disciplinary.

Evolutionary thought, because it relied exclusively upon the natural as opposed to the supernatural world for its conclusions, was defined as materialistic by the *Review*. But other schools which the *Review* regarded heretically were also emerging at this time. Positivism, named after the theory of knowledge fashioned by Auguste Comte, "admitted as knowledge only what science had certified, i.e., positive knowledge. Toward everything else these [proponents] were skeptical; toward religion specifically, or anything called spiritual, [some] declared themselves 'agnostic' — Huxley's coinage for one who says: 'I don't know.'"³⁷ Thus, materialism, positivism, skepticism, and agnosticism were terms used to designate what was generally referred to as "modern thought" or "free thinking."

Not only because Darwin's theories were compatible with such expressions of "modern thought" but also because many prominent modern thinkers identified themselves with Darwin, the *Review* consistently regarded "modern thought" as the philosophical side of the "new" science coin in general and the evolution coin in particular.

Countering "modern thought" was an argument employed by the *Review* which depended heavily upon the metaphysics of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. Herbert Hovenkamp in a study of nineteenth-century science and religion notes the centrality of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy to evangelical religion. Thomas Reid's unification of knowledge and belief (into a "one truth" universe) enabled evangelicals to hold that "nature

³⁵"Article IV," vol. 19, 367.

³⁶"Article IV," *LQR* vol. 44, 1875, 91 (full article, 91-103).

³⁷Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 160.

and Scripture were the two ways in which God spoke directly to man.”³⁸ Facts from scripture and facts from nature were learned by the empirical process and had to be gathered, analyzed, and organized in order to draw valid conclusions. Conclusions based on anything but such “facts” represented unacceptable and dangerous “hypothesizing.” Scientist and theologian, Hovenkamp observes, then must each proceed with tools and research to formulate conclusions.

What was so threatening to the “old” scientific establishment? Clergy raised on Paley, feared that modern thought in general and Darwin in particular were proposing to liberate science from religion. The metaphysical alliance between science and religion forged by Common Sense Philosophy had been broken.³⁹ The *Review*, however, was unwilling to sever the old alliance and thus continued to challenge Darwin on his lack of geological “facts” i.e., primarily of fossil records to support his theory. The *Review* also insisted on articulating a “sound” philosophy. Soundness of thought derived from human conscience designed by the Creator, conscience thus equipped to understand and interpret the structure of a reality ordered by the same Creator and ordered by the same principles. Through reason applied to nature and scripture it was possible to reach conclusions which reflected truth. This argument was developed step by step in a major 1868 article entitled “Philosophy and Theology.”⁴⁰ Thus, the *Review* was prepared to counter the hypotheses of “modern thought” which failed to utilize the tools of “sound” thinking with its appeals to conscience and scripture.

Indeed, in several articles from 1868 to 1879 Darwin was identified with some form of “modern thought” or another, for example, Darwin a Comtian positivist;⁴¹ Darwin a materialist;⁴² Darwin a “free-thinker”;⁴³ Darwin the agnostic.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The appearance of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 elicited a long and comprehensive response by Wesleyan Methodist intellectuals in the pages of the *London Quarterly Review*. To fail to give recognition to the multi-issue, interdisciplinary response of the *Review* to these matters is to do an injustice to the scholarly and spiritual seriousness with which Wesleyan Methodists and their *Review* regarded these matters.

³⁸Herbert Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1978), 11.

³⁹Susan Faye Cannon, *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period* (New York: Dawson and Science History Publications, 1978), 3.

⁴⁰“Philosophy and Theology,” *LQR* vol. 30, 1868 (full article, 21–39).

⁴¹“Philosophy and Positivism,” *LQR* vol. 31, 1868, 345 (full article, 328–348).

⁴²“Literary Notices,” *LQR* vol. 37, 1871, 516 (full article, 516–519).

⁴³“Article II: Birmingham Scepticism,” *LQR* vol. 36, 1871, 321 (full article, 310–331).

⁴⁴“Article III,” *LQR* vol. 52, 1879, 333 (full article, 323–360).