Storm of Words: Science, Religion, and Evolution in the Civil War Era

by Monte Harrell Hampton
Tuscaloosa (AL): University of Alabama Press, 2014. 345 pages

reviewed by Walter H Conser Jr

Though many Americans are familiar with the Scopes trial in 1925, the first extended evolution controversy in American history occurred in the 1880s. The event centered around a man named James Woodrow, born in 1828 in England, who immigrated to North America in 1835. Woodrow studied with Louis Agassiz at Harvard and went on to earn a doctorate at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Licensed as a Presbyterian preacher, Woodrow began his tenure as the Perkins Professor of Natural Science in Connexion with Revealed Religion at Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina in 1861. Twenty-five years later, after an extended debate, Woodrow was fired from his professorship.

In Storm of Words: Science, Religion, and Evolution in the Civil War Era, Monte Hampton provides a thoughtful historical investigation of this episode, not only within its immediate Southern Presbyterian context but also within the broader regional and national culture of its day. While some scholars might claim the priority of Alexander Winchell’s dismissal from his geology position at Vanderbilt University in 1878, Hampton argues that case revolved as much around Winchell’s views on race as it did on his views on evolution. By placing the Woodrow experience in its cultural and religious setting, Hampton demonstrates the salience of particular issues not only in their late-nineteenth-century context, but in a modern context as well.

As with many Christians of their day, Southern Presbyterians in the nineteenth century believed that reason and revelation were complementary and that, as they often put it, “science was the handmaid of theology.” They insisted that the God revealed in the book of Nature was the same God revealed in the book of Scripture. To that end, the Perkins professorship was established at the Presbyterian seminary in Columbia to delineate the proper relationship between the Bible and the natural sciences. But what exactly was the “proper” relationship between scripture and science?

For one group, personified by Robert Lewis Dabney, the Bible was the word of God, and as such, it was literally true in all matters of history and geology as well as moral truth and religious insight. The Bible, in Dabney’s words, was “the pole-star,” the implications of which were that it was unchanging, constant across time and space, and unmodified by differences among its readers’ ages, races, cultures, or locations. As a consequence, for Dabney, the interpretation of the natural history or cultural events recorded in the Bible was a straightforward application from the biblical to the contemporary time period, no matter whether the subject under consideration was geological remains or the institution
of slavery. No accommodation to the recent findings of science should ever be made, but, instead, divine fiat should be repeatedly presented as the appropriate answer to any questions. Finally, for Dabney, this biblical orthodoxy had produced the best social and cultural traditions of the Old South. In turn, the South exemplified genuine adherence to the Bible. Consequently, though Southern troops had been defeated on the battlefields of the Civil War, Dabney asserted that Southern principles could survive perpetually in a Southern Presbyterian church which affirmed the literal unchanging truth of the Bible. In other words, at the cultural level, to challenge the Bible was to challenge the South and to challenge the South was to challenge the Bible.

James Woodrow shared some of Dabney’s views, but diverged significantly in other respects. For example, Woodrow agreed that the Bible was the word of God, and did not simply contain the word of God (together with other human words) as some Northern Presbyterians maintained. Yet Woodrow insisted that the interpretation of this word, which was necessary but always conducted by very fallible human beings, must take into account the differences in people, cultures, and times between the original authors and the later readers. In short, the words may have come from God; however, Woodrow claimed that the proper understanding of their meaning was a highly complicated endeavor which necessitated the proper linguistic, historical, and scientific training if the meaning of the words were to be correctly unpacked.

As a run-up to the debate over evolution, American scientists and theologians engaged the unity of the human species in the early 1850s. Though the standard interpretation of the Bible emphasized the common descent (monogenesis) of all humans from Adam and Eve, some scientists, such as Louis Agassiz, Samuel Morton, and Josiah Nott claimed that there were separate races derived from separate creations (polygenesis). Polygenesis fundamentally challenged the traditional account and authority of the Bible, so found little support among Southern Presbyterians, even though the possibility of positing the separate (and superior) creation of whites over blacks might have appealed to defenders of Southern slavery.

In the 1860s and 1870s, attention turned to the more complicated questions of geological transformation and human evolution. The unity of humans seemed scripturally straightforward compared to questions such as the age of Earth and humanity’s place in that chronology. Where Dabney allowed no quarter for accommodation to science, other biblical scholars claimed that the Bible was silent on many important questions, for example, how long exactly is a “day”: twenty-four hours, or something else? Yet others found the biblical language flexible enough to allow for extra-biblical information without compromising the Bible’s integrity, as with the acceptance of Galileo’s heliocentric solar system by the Church.

James Woodrow—Perkins professor, Presbyterian clergyman, and well-trained scientist—emphasized that scripture addressed the fact of creation, but not the precise means or details God employed in bringing about that creation. Where Dabney dismissed evolution, Woodrow characterized it as the laws behind the workings of Nature. Moreover, where Dabney described the scientific community as perpetually in conflict and thus possessing no authority, Woodrow rebutted that not unanimity but a high degree of consensus was the appropriate expectation for scientists—a consensus that among the American scientific
community by the mid-1870s had come to support the concept of organic evolution either in its Darwinian or Neo-Lamarckian mode. Finally, where Dabney presumed that science must agree with the Bible or else be dismissed, Woodrow pictured the relationship as one of non-contradiction, in which the Bible's religious insights and lessons about God's plan for redemption were esteemed and the facts of science were not to be twisted to fit pre-conceived dogmas.

In the end, Southern Presbyterian officials decided that no form of evolution—even Woodrow's modified theistic evolution—should be taught in their seminary. Woodrow lost his position as Perkins professor. As Hampton's fine book demonstrates, the issues at the heart of the Woodrow case—scriptural authority and interpretation, the interaction of cultural context and universal claims, and the proper relationship of science and religion—continue to resonate today, and thus, Storm of Words makes an excellent read not just for historians, but for anyone engaged in our own contemporary culture wars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Walter H Conser Jr is Professor of Religious Studies and Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

AUTHOR'S ADDRESS
Walter H Conser Jr
Department of Philosophy and Religion
University of North Carolina, Wilmington
601 South College Road
Wilmington NC 28403-5601