Estimate things, not by their rareness, difficulty, or credit, but by their real importance." (1) 

Science and religion in the late twentieth century have an ambiguous relationship. Some theologians contest every scientific finding that calls into question biblical wisdom. The majority ignore science, considering it a separate realm. Another minority looks forward to the emergence of a new paradigm which will unite scientific and theological knowledge. What was the dialogue between science and religion like in antebellum southern Methodism during the mid-nineteenth century? Was the situation the same or different? Are there any perspectives that would be instructive for the present? To investigate these matters the Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (hereafter the QRS) was surveyed during a five-year period, starting from 1847, the first year of its publication.

The Quarterly and the Dialogue 

Inception and Character of the QRS. In his "introduction" (2) to the first volume Bishop Bascom, the first editor of the QRS, began by noting that he did not want the QRS to add to the body of "fleeting, ephemeral literature" already in existence which was doing "fearful damage to society." High quality periodical literature, however, could make new, important ideas available to the literate masses, who in turn influenced the illiterate through their close association, an educational enterprise "indispensable to political and national safety." He took for granted "the recognition and just supremacy of Christian principle, in our literature" which included theology, literature, arts, and science. He wanted to avoid articles that "mirror the reigning passions ... instead of an honest and earnest contention for truths and principles, little, if at all, influenced by the changes and passions of the moment."

The QRS was in no sense to be a partisan journal. The issue of slavery would never be mentioned except when defense against fanatics was called for through their prior attacks and misrepresentations. The QRS, in this period, maintained an affirmation of the biblical view of one set of original parents for all, when it would have provided more support for slavery to entertain the newer scientific view of multiple sets of parents. (3)

Bascomb wanted the QRS to be a church-sponsored journal modeled after similar quarterly reviews of the day (Edinburgh Review and The London Quarterly Review, for instance), the first of its kind in the south. It was to be a "general review of important subjects, rather than critical censorship." "We would have the work a school of instruction, rather than a literary tribunal."

The QRS, along with other educational periodicals, reflected the general diffusion of knowledge during this period, including the popularizing of science, which was part of the process of American democratization, the rising status of skilled craftsman and a middle class in an industrial society, and the overall progressive movement toward a better model of life in a new world. (4)

The QRS reveals a strong, vibrant, competent intellectual tradition that assumed the importance and naturalness of the dialogue of science and religion without question. This...