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Beyond Self-Interest: The Political Theory and Practice of Evangelical Women in Antebellum America

MARK DAVID HALL

Prior to the publication of Gerda Lerner's study of the Grimke sisters in 1967, academic historians and students of political theory largely ignored antebellum women. Since that time many fine books and articles have been published about them. The vast majority of these works have focused on relatively innovative or progressive women, such as early religious radicals, abolitionists, and, especially, feminists.¹ In recent years, the number of works on conservative antebellum women has increased markedly, but most of these works ignore or underestimate the influence of evangelical Christianity in the lives of these women.² Moreover, scholars who have looked seriously

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1. Representative examples include Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), and her *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Susan Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Paula Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978); Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (New York: Oxford, 1984); Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Right Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

2. See, for instance, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973); Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Jane Tompkins,

at evangelicalism have tended to view it as a repressive force that had to be overcome before women could be truly free.³

This article argues that the political class of evangelical women was encouraged by its religious convictions to become involved in the public sphere in unprecedented ways.⁴ In the process of doing so, these women developed and promulgated social and political ideas that became influential in antebellum America. Study of their ideas and actions sheds light on antebellum history, in general, and the relationship between evangelicalism and politics, more specifically. Moreover, the insights of these women regarding the limits of politics and the importance of civil society are relevant to current debates.

Two qualifications are necessary. First, although I believe that evangelical women in antebellum America possessed a sophisticated and interesting political theory, I do not intend to argue that it is strikingly innovative. As will be seen, it is closely related to the political theory of many American Whigs as described by Daniel Walker Howe in *The Political Culture of American Whigs*⁵ or the “reform liberals” discussed

Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Nina Baym, *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993), and *American Women Writers and the Work of History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Mary Kelly, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and her “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” *The Journal of American History* (September 1996): 401-24; Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese makes this same point in a broader context in her “Advocacy and the Writing of American Woman's History,” in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, eds. Bruce Kuklick and D.G. Hart (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 103-07.

3. See, for example, Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women's Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 204; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 183-229; Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, 75-101, 157, 166; Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*. I discuss this literature in more detail below.

4. The idea of a “political class” is described by Donald Lutz as the “between 15 and 20 percent of the adult population” that is actively involved in politics; see Donald Lutz, *A Preface to American Political Theory* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 102-03. Of course, antebellum women were not involved in politics in the same ways men were, but many of them were in positions to have an effect on politics through writing, private influence, and public debate. Many, but not all of these women were white, literate, and middle or upper class. Although the focus here is on evangelical members of this class, I believe that many other antebellum women were influenced by their ideas.

5. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

by J. David Greenstone in *The Lincoln Persuasion*.⁶ However, Howe consciously “restricted his study to men,” even though he recognized that women like Catharine Beecher are worthy of study.⁷ Likewise, Greenstone only considered the writings of males in detail, although he had originally planned to provide an extensive discussion of Lydia Maria Child.⁸ Had these scholars considered women in their respective books, they would have found that their exclusion from many forms of political involvement led them to focus on different questions, and arrive at different conclusions, from those made by many male antebellum Whigs.⁹ Notably, antebellum women were more likely than male Whigs or reform liberals to recognize the dangers of excessive individualism, less likely to praise capitalism, and less sanguine about the use of government to achieve moral reform.

The second caveat is that evangelical women differed on both politics and political theory. Most notably, scholars like Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have argued that the differences between northern and southern women were so great as to make generalizations about them very dangerous.¹⁰ This point is well taken, but I would suggest here, and will argue elsewhere, that these differences have been exaggerated because students of southern women have tended to compare their subjects to relatively liberal northern women.

RELIGION AND ANTEBELLUM WOMEN

Not only did early scholarship on antebellum women neglect evangelical Christianity, it neglected or discounted religion altogether. For instance, Gerda Lerner admits that in her early work on Sarah Grimke, she did not comprehend Grimke’s argument for the emancipation of women because it “was almost entirely theological; her language was biblical; her images were derived from Christian iconography. I was not trained in theology and had only cursory knowledge of Christian

6. J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

7. Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs*, 4.

8. Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism*, xvi, 190.

9. Howe suggests this point in his *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 118-20. In this book, he considers three women in some detail: Catharine Beecher, Dorothea Dix, and Margaret Fuller. His treatment of the first two women supports the above argument, and Fuller clearly falls outside the scope of this article.

10. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 200-03, 232-33; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

thought; thus I found it difficult to comprehend her arguments.”¹¹ Less circumspect about their knowledge of Christianity, Barbara Epstein simplistically suggests that religious activity in the era was “motivated to a large degree by women’s anger over their subordinate status” and Sarah Evans contends that religion was merely an outlet “for suppressed anger and anxiety.”¹²

Students of antebellum women did not long ignore the importance of religion in the lives of their subjects. Since the mid-1970s, scholars have published a number of works on liberal or radical varieties of Christianity adhered to by women in antebellum America.¹³ Recent studies have expanded upon these earlier works to show clear connections between religious and social and political radicalism. However, evangelical ideas continued to be ignored or treated as something that had to be overcome in order for women to be free.¹⁴

Over the past few years, women’s historians and students of American religious history have published several fine studies that take seriously the religious beliefs and actions of evangelical women in antebellum America. Particularly good examples of this trend include

11. Lerner, ed., *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimke*, 4.

12. Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 4; Sarah Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 74.

13. Some of these studies purport to examine religion among antebellum women more generally, but are skewed toward liberal or radical women. For instance, Ann Douglas examines thirty middle-class women who “were among the leading literary propagandists for a sentimentalized culture” in her *The Feminization of American Culture*, 80. Of these thirty, she identifies eleven (or 37 percent) of them as becoming Unitarians or Universalists by the end of their lives, 332-39. By contrast, Unitarians and Universalists never comprised more than 2 percent of the American population in the nineteenth century. See Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 153, 220.

14. See, for instance, Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, 204; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; Alzog, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, 183-229; Elizabeth B. Clark, “‘Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* (September 1995): 463-93; Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, 75-101, 157, 166; and Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*. Some of these works acknowledge that a particular element of evangelicalism may have had a liberating influence, but they often use the concept “evangelical” quite loosely or conflate it with radical religious ideas (as Elizabeth Clark does by her own admission in Clark, “‘Sacred Rights of the Weak,’” 464; see also Sandra F. VanBurkleo, “*Belonging to the World*”: *Women’s Rights and American Constitutional Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 88-92, 104-09; and Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1999). Likewise, Isenberg briefly discusses Catharine Beecher and her advocacy of female education, but she clearly considers her to be hopelessly conservative in her *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, 80, 88-89.

Katherine Long's study of the revival of 1857-58 and Christine Heyrman's study on the origins of the Bible Belt.¹⁵ Likewise, Julie Jeffrey provides a much-needed study of "ordinary women" in the anti-slavery movement, many of whom were evangelicals.¹⁶ Of particular note, Catherine Brekus has written an excellent book on evangelical women preachers between 1740 and 1845, many of whom have been completely ignored by generations of church historians. These studies have begun to uncover the substance of antebellum evangelical women, but their authors still often agree with my basic claim that these women were neglected, as suggested by Brekus's statement that "many historians have been so interested in examining women's social radicalism that they have ignored their theology, implicitly dismissing their beliefs as insignificant."¹⁷

THE INFLUENCE OF EVANGELICALISM IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

The phrase "evangelical Christianity" has been defined in a number of ways, but it is best understood in terms of its doctrinal distinctives. Following Lyman Beecher's lead in his sermon, "The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints," I consider evangelicals to be Protestants who emphasize the need for a conversion experience and who adhere to historic Christian doctrines on original sin, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, the Trinity, and the authority of the Bible as interpreted by individuals.¹⁸ This definition is broad enough to include Christians from a variety of denominations and different worship styles,

15. Kathryn T. Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*.

16. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Anti-Slavery Movement* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

17. Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 207.

18. Similar definitions have been used by Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 2-3; and John West, *The Politics of Reason and Revelation: Religion and Civil Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 7. Other attempts to define the concept are discussed in Leonard Sweet, "The Evangelical Tradition in America," in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), 1-86. Space constraints prevent a detailed examination of this issue here. Instead, I would suggest that scholars who prefer to define evangelicalism in terms of denominations or revival practices might find my argument more appealing if they substitute "conservative Protestant" for "evangelical" throughout the article. Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, 2 vols, ed. Barbara Cross (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, [1861] reprint, 1961), 411-18.

but narrow enough to exclude groups like Catholics, Unitarians, transcendentalists, Mormons, and radical free thinkers.¹⁹

Some scholars have objected that definitions such as this one are too broad because they subsume too many antebellum Americans under the label "evangelical." But, as Mark Noll and others have demonstrated, most Americans in the mid-nineteenth century were evangelicals, or were significantly influenced by them.²⁰ Of course, the number of evangelicals in America has never been static, and it increased dramatically as the revivals known as the Second Great Awakening spread throughout antebellum America. This is especially true among women, who constituted two out of every three church members.²¹ Yet the percentage of Americans who were evangelicals decreased as immigration from Europe increased in the 1840s, although events like the Revival of 1857-58 helped to keep them a dominant force in America well into the twentieth century.²²

The Second Great Awakening revitalized American evangelicalism, but more significantly, it broke down old walls to provide women with new and significant opportunities. Some historians have argued that it was a conservative movement aimed at reasserting the authority of ministers or the emerging bourgeois class.²³ While there is something to this analysis, Nathan Hatch's explanation of the Second Great Awakening as a predominately populist movement centered on the Bible that seriously challenged the authority of traditional denominations and elite clergy is more convincing. Although Hatch does not really consider the Awakening's political implications, he does note that the movements stemming from it were "to make Christianity a liberating force" insofar as "people were given the right to think and act for themselves rather than depending upon the mediations of an educated

19. Of course, evangelicals were not monolithic. Especially noticeable are differences related to denomination and geographic region. However, it is still possible to generalize about evangelicals as a whole. See Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, xiv-xx.

20. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 241-44; Howe, *Making the American Self*, 210; Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, 4-5, 44-49.

21. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, 30.

22. Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs*, 349; Kathryn T. Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*.

23. See, e.g., John R. Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954); Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, [1960] reprint 1983); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

elite.”²⁴ I believe that this insight applies to gender as well as education and class.

The Second Great Awakening not only transformed the religious landscape in America, it significantly changed the way women viewed the family, society, and politics. Notably, evangelicalism helped expand the Revolutionary Era notion of republican motherhood to give women an even greater and more autonomous role in the moral and spiritual education of their families.²⁵ Likewise, evangelicalism’s millennialism encouraged women to attempt to reform society as a whole, a task that led them to engage in public activities such as writing, organizing benevolent societies, and even participating in politics. In the process of doing so, they came to recognize the importance and power of the institutions of civil society—sometimes called mediating institutions.²⁶ Underlying these changes was a political theory consciously developed by certain antebellum women, a theory which I shall refer to as evangelical republican womanhood.

24. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 11.

25. On the concept of republican motherhood, see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1980). Since 1980, scholars have offered important qualifications to Kerber’s work, but her thesis remains persuasive. See, for instance, Ruth H. Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” *Signs* 13 (Autumn 1987): 37–58; Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (October 1987): 689–721; and Rosemarie Zagarri, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (April 1998): 203–30. On the importance of what has traditionally been called the “private sphere,” see especially Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

26. Berger and Neuhaus define mediating institutions as “those institutions that stand between the private world of individuals and the large, impersonal structures of modern society,” in their *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1996), 148–50. Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, eds., in their *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institutions Press, 1999), 2, define civil society as “the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs.” These institutions (and others) produce what John Coleman and Robert Putnam call social capital; see John Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

The classic work on civil society remains Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: George Adlard, 1835, 1838); vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: J & HG Langley, 1840). So-called “communitarian” literature is related to literature on civil society, but it is often more focused on the role of the state (e.g., Robert Bellah, et. al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and his *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown, 1993).

Evangelical Christianity provided antebellum women with answers to many of the foundational questions that political theory generally addresses. As will be illustrated in the next section, their views of human nature, morality, society, and history were clearly influenced by their faith. Moreover, they often argued for their positions by directly appealing to the Bible. Of course there were other influences, such as the Scottish Enlightenment, but even here they were more influenced by Christian thinkers like Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart rather than agnostics like David Hume.

THREE EXEMPLARS

By any measure, Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, and Lydia Sigourney were three of the most influential women in antebellum America. Together they wrote more than one hundred books, many of which were best sellers. Although it is possible to find scholarly literature that considers particular aspects of their political theory or activity, it is fair to suggest that most students of American history and politics do not think of them as political theorists or actors. This section demonstrates that they were political theorists and actors, and in the process, to illustrate the relationship between their religious and political ideas.

Catharine Beecher (1800-1878) was the first of Congregational (later Presbyterian) minister Lyman Beecher's twelve children. Best known today for her support of education and opposition to woman suffrage, Beecher left behind a rich legacy of books, articles, and pamphlets that has been relatively neglected by modern scholars.²⁷ Of particular interest to students of intellectual history and political theory are her careful and systematic reflections on moral philosophy, especially those in her 1831 work, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*. She also wrote five books on religion and theology, including *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (1836) and *Common Sense Applied to Religion* (1857).²⁸ In addition, she penned numerous books on education and wrote on political issues such as slavery and suffrage.

27. Exceptions to this rule include Kathryn Kish Sklar's fine biography of Beecher, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*; Marie Caskey, *Chariots of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978); Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelly, and Anne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Woman's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Nicole Tonkovich, *Domesticity With a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

28. I have argued elsewhere that Beecher should be considered America's first female philosopher and theologian. As well, I contend, contrary to some Beecher scholars, that she remained an evangelical throughout her life. See Mark David Hall, "Catharine Beecher:

Yet, without a doubt, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841) is her most influential work. The book went through more than fourteen editions, was reprinted annually from 1842 to 1857, and later became the basis for *The American Woman's Home* (1869), which she coauthored with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. As the title suggests, *A Treatise* is a home economics textbook, but it is one that addresses the central questions of political theory in a sustained and intelligent manner.

Beecher's *Treatise* begins with extensive quotations from, and discussion of, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.²⁹ She was drawn to this book because of Tocqueville's treatment of democracy, equality, and civic virtue. In particular, she appreciated his diagnosis of democracy's weaknesses and agreed with his promotion of the institutions of civil society as a solution to many of its problems. However, her understanding of these institutions differed from that of Tocqueville because she embraced a thoroughly evangelical view of morality and history.

Beecher argued that morality is ultimately derived from Christian principles, particularly "the Divine precept which requires us to do to others as we would that they should do to us." From this precept it follows that the object of life is not to "secure as much as possible of all the various enjoyments placed within reach" but to assume the character of Christ, "the grand peculiarity" of which is "*self-denying benevolence*."³⁰ Much of the *Treatise* is dedicated to explaining the obligations derived from this principle that Beecher believed men and women have to themselves, their families, their fellow citizens, and the world.

Beecher held Americans to such a high a moral standard because she considered them to be responsible for "exhibiting to the world, the

America's First Female Philosopher and Theologian," *Fides et Historia* 32 (Winter/Spring 2000): 65-80.

29. Beecher used Henry Reeve's English translation of de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Although she added and altered a few punctuation marks, italicized a few phrases, and capitalized a few words, Beecher essentially remained faithful to Reeve's text. I discuss the relationship between Beecher and Tocqueville in detail elsewhere.

30. Beecher's use of the concept of benevolence reflects her debt to thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment like Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown, whom she read when preparing her *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible* (Hartford, Conn., 1831) and her *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: J.B. Ford and Co., 1874), 52. She specifically claimed that her moral views were compatible with those presented by Jonathan Edwards in his *Dissertation concerning the end for which God has created the world* (1765); Beecher, *Treatise*, 204. Beecher and Edwards almost certainly had significantly different views of benevolence, but that is not at issue here. See Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston, Mass.: T.H. Webb and Co. 1841), 120, 157-58, 264, emphasis in original.

beneficent influences of Christianity, when carried into every social, civil, and political institution.”³¹ Like her Puritan ancestors, she believed that America was a city on a hill destined to advance the kingdom of God on earth. Although God’s victory was inevitable, America’s leadership in this process was not. If America did not produce virtuous citizens, democracy could degenerate into majority tyranny, which was “more dreadful than any other form of civil government, as a thousand tyrants are more to be dreaded than one.”³²

At one level, Beecher’s concern for creating moral citizens was a variation of the popular idea of republican motherhood identified and discussed by Linda Kerber and others. A core element of this concept is that women should not be directly involved in public life, but that it is necessary for them to mold and shape the men who are. Beecher clearly believed that women have an important role to play in this regard, as is suggested by her claim that

The formation of moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother writes the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibres that hereafter are the forest tree; the wife sways the heart whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation.³³

Moreover, she opposed some public activities by women, most notably rejecting female suffrage for most of her life.³⁴

Beecher supported elements of republican motherhood, but she also argued that women “have an equal interest in all social and civil

31. Ibid., 12.

32. Beecher, *Treatise*, 13. Catherine Beecher, *The Moral Instructor for Schools and Families: Containing Lessons on the Duties of Life, Arranged for Study and Recitation, Also Designed as a Reading Book for Schools* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Truman and Smith, 1838), 59-64. Kathryn Sklar suggests that Beecher’s rhetoric regarding the millennium indicates that she thought it was coming in a “social rather than a strictly religious form,” in her *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, 159. However, Beecher’s claims are compatible with the thoroughly religious eschatological position common among evangelicals known as millennialism or post-millennialism. On this doctrine see Lyman Beecher, *A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensable* (Andover, Mass., 1814); and Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 139-75. Beecher did not hesitate to criticize America, but when she did so she fit into the classical American discourse known as the jeremiad. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 157. Millennialism is now generally accepted as an important factor in antebellum life, but some historians still challenge its importance; see e.g., Mark Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830-1860* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); *ibid.*, 13.

33. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 13.

34. Ibid., 4; See also Catharine Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Henry Perkins, 1837); and her *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women* (Boston, Mass.: Phillips Sampson, 1851).

concerns; and . . . no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, that sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex," and that they had "equal rights with the other sex."³⁵ In addition, she engaged in direct political activity such as organizing and speaking at public meetings, circulating petitions that were delivered to Congress, and writing a widely distributed essay, "To the Benevolent Women of the United States," when opposing the removal of Cherokees from their land in Georgia.³⁶ Similarly, she did not hesitate to join in the most controversial theological, economic, or political debates of the era.³⁷ Finally, she even came to accept a limited version of female suffrage near the end of her life.³⁸

Although one can point to some of Beecher's writings and actions that are political in the narrow sense of the word, her significance as a political thinker and actor does not come from this activity alone. More important is her challenge to the excesses of liberalism and individualism that were beginning to dominate American political thought at the time, and her defense of the importance of the institutions of civil society, which she considered to be absolutely essential for the health of a democratic nation.

To understand Beecher's political theory, it is necessary to recognize that she rejected what she understood to be liberalism's view that society is merely a collection of individuals who contract together for essentially selfish reasons. She described the latter position in Hobbesian terms, noting that even within such a society "there would be a constant scrambling among those of equal claims, and brute force must be the final result, in which case the strongest would have the best of everything."³⁹ Instead, she argued that society is a complex structure made of numerous interpersonal "relations and their attending obligations" that were

to be determined, not with reference to the wishes and interests of a few, but solely with reference to the general good of all; so that each individual shall have his own interest, as much as the public benefit, secured by them.

35. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 4, 10.

36. Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, 62-70; Mary Hershberger, "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s," *The Journal of American History* (June 1999): 15-40.

37. See e.g., Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Letters on the Difficulties of Religion, An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females, Common Sense Applied to Religion, or the Bible and the People*; and Hall, "Catharine Beecher: America's First Female Philosopher and Theologian."

38. Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, 201.

39. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 124.

For this purpose, it is needful that certain relations be sustained, that involve the duties of subordination. There must be the magistrate and the subject, one of whom is the superior, and the other the inferior. There must be the relations of husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and pupil, employer and employed, each involving the relative duties of subordination.⁴⁰

Beecher believed that all people are equal and deserving of respect because they were all created in the image of God.⁴¹ However, if they are to flourish they must live in a society; and that society required individuals to accept the obligations inherent in their various relationships. God determined some relationships, such as those of parents and children.⁴² Others are voluntary, as in a democratic state where individuals elect magistrates to have authority over them.⁴³ Marriage falls into both categories insofar as women chose to enter into the divine ordinance of marriage, which required wives to submit to their husbands. With respect to the latter, Beecher emphasized that women must freely consent to marriage, and that they have a right to avoid this institution if they so desired.⁴⁴

Beecher supported the submission of wives to husbands because she thought it to be required by a literal reading of biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:22-23. She did argue that there were limitations to the obligation of women to submit to their husbands, but nonetheless she clearly supported a hierarchical view of marriage. Her views on marriage have led some scholars to assume that she thought women should submit to men generally.⁴⁵ This is not the case. Instead, she argued that they should be involved in the institutions of civil society, and that in "matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergy-man, in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners" women "have a superior influence."⁴⁶ Thus, of the four major mediating institutions that are the subjects of individual chapters in Berger and Neuhaus's seminal work, *To Empower People*, Beecher contended that women should have a dominant influence in at least three of them.⁴⁷

40. Ibid., 2.

41. Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible*, 79; and her *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion*, 194.

42. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 2.

43. Ibid., 3.

44. Ibid.

45. Blanch Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 212-13; Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*, 88.

46. Ibid., 9.

47. Berger and Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, 2nd ed.

It is perhaps tempting to dismiss Beecher's conclusion that women should have a superior influence in certain societal institutions as being a poor substitute for having the right to vote or hold political office. Yet, it is only possible to do this if one ignores de Tocqueville's insight, now accepted by many modern political theorists and social scientists, that the institutions of civil society are critical to any nation's health. If one concedes the latter point, it is necessary to take Beecher's claims more seriously. Of course, one might argue that by talking in terms of influence rather than power, Beecher did not intend for women to become directly involved in civil society, but her writings and life belie this possibility.

Take, for instance, Beecher's support of female education. Both her vision for the substance of this education, as well as her promotion of it, show that she wanted women to play an important role in the nation's public life. She argued, for instance, that every woman needed "habits of investigation, of correct reasoning, of persevering attention, of regular system, of accurate analysis, and of vigorous mental action, that are the primary objects to be sought in preparing American women for their arduous duties."⁴⁸ Toward this end, she promoted a variety of qualitative reforms in female education, including requiring women to take classes in mathematics, English grammar, Latin, geography, history, physiology, technology, archeology, vocal music, instrumental music, "Philosophy, Chemistry, Astronomy, Botany, Geology and Mineralogy, Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, Political Economy, and the Evidences of Christianity,"—and for many courses, college texts would be used.⁴⁹ Women needed such a rigorous education for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that they had the responsibility of teaching their children (both girls and boys) at home until they were fourteen years old.⁵⁰

Beecher recognized that not everyone could adopt her vision of the ideal household because many American women were not well educated.⁵¹ To remedy this situation, she spent a large portion of her life promoting female education. She founded schools in Hartford and Cincinnati, and later pursued a national strategy through her involvement with the Central Committee for Promoting National Education (which she founded in 1843), the American Woman's Educational Association (begun in 1852), and the Milwaukee Female College (which

48. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 34.

49. *Ibid.*, 35.

50. *Ibid.*, 26.

51. Beecher, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women; and her Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*.

she founded in 1850 and led until 1856). The latter organizations made particularly important contributions to the professionalism of teaching and to the substantial increase in the number of female teachers in the nineteenth century. These educated women could effectively teach their own children or open schools to teach children whose parents were unwilling or unable to educate them at home.⁵²

Beecher believed that family, schools, benevolent organizations, churches, and other mediating institutions played important roles in society. She recognized that politics was important as well, and did not hesitate to contribute to debates about subjects such as abolition, capitalism, and suffrage. Her works on some of these issues have been dismissed as being naively conservative,⁵³ but a careful reading of them shows that they are sophisticated and well informed. For instance, although she clearly opposed slavery, she argued that abolitionist tactics were polarizing Americans on the issue, and that if they were not stopped they would plunge the nation into a bloody "civil war," whose "train of fire would pass over us like a devouring fire."⁵⁴ Likewise, her criticisms of the "capitalists of the East," who "avail themselves" of female labor in their textile mills, stand in sharp contrast to the praise of capitalism offered by some of her evangelical brothers.⁵⁵ Finally, as suggested above, she offered a sustained criticism of what she considered to be the excessive individualism that she thought was becoming far too prevalent in the country.⁵⁶

Beecher's views of morality, history, society, and education were representative of evangelical women, as one can see by comparing them to those in works like Emma Willard's *Morals for the Young* (1857), Lydia Sigourney's *Moral Pieces* (1815) and *Letters to Young Ladies* (1860), and Sarah Josepha Hale's *Woman's Record* (1853). Nota-

52. Some Beecher scholars have suggested that she did not really want all women to be educated (e.g., Tonkovich, *Domesticity With a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller*, but such a claim is difficult to support in light of Beecher's writings, e.g., *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education, Presented to the Trustees* (Hartford, Conn.: Packard & Butler, 1829), 69; *The Duty of American Women to Their Country* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1845); *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women*, 27, 221-22; *Woman Suffrage and Woman's Profession* (Hartford, Conn.: Brown & Gross, 1871), 34, 46-47; *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* and the activities mentioned above.

53. See, e.g., Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery*, 139-42; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 69.

54. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females*, 127.

55. Beecher, *The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1846), 6; Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs*, 96-122.

56. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*.

bly, as can be seen in the penultimate section of this essay, evangelical women almost without exception promoted and were involved in benevolent organizations.⁵⁷

Like Beecher, Emma Willard (1787-1870) was an important advocate of female education. In 1821, she founded Troy Female Seminary, which was attended by more than twelve thousand women between 1821 and 1872. Many of these women became schoolteachers themselves, thus magnifying Willard's contribution to the rise of female literacy and the professionalism of education. Moreover, she achieved a nationwide influence through the more than one million copies of her history texts and charts that she sold throughout her lifetime.⁵⁸ These texts were highly political, promoting, among other things, a millennial view of American history, the importance of virtuous citizens, common schools, female education, the formation of benevolent societies, and a sophisticated theory of international relations.⁵⁹ She even went so far as to endorse John C. Fremont for president.⁶⁰ Willard's texts tell us a great deal about her political theory, but the focus here is on an unjustly neglected letter where she most clearly states her views on women and politics.⁶¹

Three months before Willard's student, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wrote the Seneca Falls Declaration, Willard published a "Letter to Dupont De L'Eure on the Political Position of Women" in *The American Literary Magazine*. In the letter she made it quite clear that both America and France should enact constitutional reforms to recognize

57. Many of these organizations explicitly reflected the ideas promulgated by Beecher, Willard, etc. For instance, Richard Meckel shows that the numerous evangelical maternal associations in antebellum America promoted visions of the family and education similar to that advocated by Beecher and Willard. See Richard A. Meckel, "Educating a Ministry of Mothers: Evangelical Maternal Associations, 1815-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Winter 1982): 403-23.

58. S.A. Allibone, *Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia, Pa.: J.B. Lippincott, 1872), 2729.

59. Emma Willard, *History of the United States, or Republic of America: Exhibited in Connexion with its Chronology and Progressive Geology, By Means of a Series of Maps*, 4th ed., rev. and corrected (New York: White, Gallaher, & White, 1831), 193, 221, 244, 285, 301, 305; *A System of Universal History in Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: F.J. Huntington, 1839), 458-59; *Universal History, in Perspective*, 10th ed. (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1851), 155, 344-45, 477.

60. Willard, *Last Leaves of American History: Comprising the Histories of the Mexican War and California* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), 159, 225-26.

61. I examine Willard's history texts in detail in an unpublished book manuscript, *Beyond Self-Interest: The Political Theory of American Women, 1815-1860*. Nina Baym provides an excellent discussion of Willard's texts, but addresses slightly different questions than I do. See Baym, *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays*, 121-35; and her *American Women Writers and the Work of History*.

that “[w]omen are surely persons, and if so, their rights are equally sacred with those of men.”⁶² As such,

we maintain women as well as men should be consulted concerning the laws by which they are to be bound, and that their best wisdom should be called forth to aid in planning the wisest and most righteous arrangements for the common good. We therefore lay down the principle, that while men, the heads of the natural kingdoms, confederate to do for the common political household, what the individual father and master does for his own,—that woman, on the other hand, should confederate also, to do for the great common family, what it is the duty of each mother and mistress to do for her own household.⁶³

In other words, women should have a say in laws that affect them. Note that the passage has two possible interpretations. The first is that women should have a say in virtually all laws, for they are bound by most laws and most laws have something to do with the “common good.” Yet Willard also seemed to limit women’s input to laws concerning the “duty of each mother and mistress,” and it is this approach that she expanded on in her letter.

It is important to refer to Willard’s letter because it is representative of the approach evangelical women took toward politics. Rather than dismissing political involvement altogether, they usually argued that women might be involved if particular issues affected their duties. Hence Willard did not hesitate to directly lobby state legislatures for school subsidies, write pamphlets in support of universal peace, or attempt to prevent (and later resolve) the Civil War through writing editorials, organizing petitions, directly lobbying Congress, and by authoring a much maligned and misunderstood pamphlet “Via Media.”⁶⁴ Even after she was elected to public office in 1840, she remained convinced that there were proper spheres of female involvement and thus never became an advocate of female suffrage, although, as her life demonstrates, it was often hard to differentiate between the two spheres.

Willard’s explicitly political activity is interesting and important, but, as suggested earlier, her greatest influence came through her history books. Significantly, her view of America’s place in world history is similar to that of many other antebellum women historians. From biblical histories such Sarah Hall’s *Conversations on the Bible*⁶⁵ and

62. Emma Willard, “Letter to Dupont L’Eure on the Political Position of Women,” *The American Literary Magazine* (1848): 246.

63. *Ibid.*, 251.

64. John Lord, *The Life of Emma Willard* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873), 46-50, 91, 250-301; Alma Lutz, *Emma Willard Daughter of Democracy* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1929), 64-65.

65. Sarah Hall, *Conversations on the Bible*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Harrison Hall, 1827).

Susanna Rowson's *Biblical Dialogues*,⁶⁶ to Anne Bullard's 1832 history of the Reformation, to the numerous books on American history, such as Eliza Robbins's *Tales From American History*⁶⁷ and Augusta Berard's *School History of the United States*,⁶⁸ antebellum women authors demonstrated their commitment to millennialism and to the basic tenets of evangelical republican womanhood. Yet there are differences among these works that are worth exploring. For instance, Lydia Sigourney provides uncharacteristically harsh criticism of America's treatment of Native Americans in a number of her historical poems, her local history, *Sketch of Connecticut, Forty Years Since*, and her ambitious *Traits of the Aborigines of America*.⁶⁹ The basis of her criticism was, in effect, that Americans were not living up to their God-given responsibility to Christianize and civilize the Indians. Although such criticism is itself offensive to modern ears, it is notable insofar as a fair number of her contemporaries portrayed Native Americans as savages who deserved to be destroyed. Thus, Sigourney was willing to risk alienating her audience by criticizing popular beliefs and government policy from a moral perspective.⁷⁰

Lydia Sigourney is a particularly good example of a serious thinker whose work is today dismissed as "overly elegant, didactic, and morbid,"⁷¹ or who is unfairly characterized as "a mildly comical figure exemplifying the worst aspects of domestic sentimentalism."⁷² Yet not only was Sigourney one of the most popular, successful, and influential authors of her day, she actively promulgated a well thought out vision of society and politics through her innumerable short poems, various collections of miscellany, and her history textbooks. She wrote more than sixty-seven books and was so popular that Louis Godey was willing to pay her simply to put her name on his magazine's masthead. Although a careful examination of her poems and books bears much fruit, this article considers only some of her correspondence that, if nothing

66. Susanna Rowson, *Biblical Dialogues between a Father and His Family* (Boston, Mass.: Richardson & Lord, 1822).

67. Eliza Robbins, *Tales from American History* (New York: W. Burgess, 1829).

68. Augusta Berard, *School History of the United States* (Philadelphia, Pa.: H. Cowperthwait & Co., 1855).

69. Lydia Sigourney, *Sketch of Connecticut, Forty Years Since* (Hartford, Conn.: Oliver D. Cooke and Sons, 1824); and her ambitious *Traits of the Aborigines of America: A Poem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1822).

70. Nina Baym is one of the very few scholars to treat these works in a serious and systematic manner. See her *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, 2nd ed.; and her *American Women Writers and the Work of History*.

71. Gale, *A Cultural Encyclopedia of the 1850s in America*, 338.

72. Baym, *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays*, 152 (referring to how others have characterized Sigourney).

else, shows that she was in a position to influence numerous public figures.⁷³

Sigourney carried on a long and fruitful correspondence with many notable Americans. The Connecticut Historical Society alone has letters to her *from* leading Americans such as President Zachary Taylor, President Millard Fillmore, Brown University President Francis Wayland, Sam Houston of Texas, Theodore Dwight of Yale, as well as literary legends John Greenleaf Whittier, Edgar Allan Poe, Oliver W. Holmes, Sr., Harriet Beecher Stowe, and female reformers Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, Sarah J. Hale, Amelia Bloomer, along with many others. Some of the letters refer to business or literary matters, but a good number reflect social/political issues, such as Amelia Bloomer's letter about starting a temperance paper, Judge Doty's letter about the inclusion of an article in the Wisconsin Constitution giving Indians the right to vote, and Samuel Howe's letter thanking Sigourney for her work on behalf of the blind. Among the most interesting letters are two 1824 missives from Charles Hicks, a Cherokee chieftain, and Mashahmeya, an unidentified Native American, praising her for aid of various kinds.⁷⁴

Sigourney spent much of her time writing, but she also traveled widely and was involved in a variety of benevolent organizations. For instance, her 1825 journal records a trip to the South where she and her husband had the opportunity to eat dinner with President John Quincy Adams, and then to travel to Charlottesville, Virginia, where they ate with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and James Madison at Montpelier—in addition to attending lectures at the University of Virginia. At a later date, she wrote about her opportunity to show Henry Clay and his wife around town and to give him a tour of the local asylum and prison, two reform institutions with which she was involved. Like most evangelical women, she was a firm supporter of the Whigs, referring in one letter to the blessed day when “Nero leaves the palace to others,” an obvious reference to President Andrew Jackson. Furthermore, she did not support reform organizations with her pen and

73. It should be noted that some of Sigourney's poems were explicitly political, such as “The Last Journey of Henry Clay,” “Still I Live” [about Daniel Webster], and “Return of Napoleon,” just to name three examples out of one volume of poetry. See Lydia Sigourney, *The Western Home: And Other Poems* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Parry and McMillan, 1854).

74. Amelia Bloomer to Lydia Sigourney (LS), 9 May 1849; Judge Doty to LS, 16 April 1840 and 20 December 1846; and Samuel Howe to LS, 2 July 1833; Charles Hicks to LS, 4 August 1824; and Mashahmeya to LS, 17 April 1824, all in the Hoadley Collection, Box 6, of the Connecticut Historical Society.

voice only, as evidenced through her coordinating a collection to aid the Greeks during their struggle for independence.⁷⁵

This brief sampling of Sigourney's correspondence provides evidence that the "Sweet Singer of Hartford" deserves to be known for more than her sentimental poetry. Sigourney consciously promulgated her political ideas through published works, private correspondence, and actions. This is true of all the women discussed so far, in addition to women like Mary Lyon (1797-1849), founder of Mount Holyoke Seminary, Sarah J. Hale (1837-77), the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* and author of numerous books, including her massive *Woman's Record* (1853) which contained biographies of over 1650 women; Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and numerous others. These women shared a commitment to the basic tenets of evangelical republican womanhood, and they promulgated these concepts throughout their works. Their ideas influenced numerous literate women, who in turn helped transform American society and politics.⁷⁶

REFORM AND REFORMATION

Not only did Beecher, Willard, Sigourney, and their colleagues teach the basic tenets of evangelical republican womanhood, they actively participated in the great task of making America a shining city on a hill. They all made personal contributions of time, money, and effort to promote female education, moral education, and missionary work. Furthermore, they joined and encouraged the widespread blossoming of reform activity inspired by the Second Great Awakening—activity that has continued to reverberate down to the present day. This section briefly addresses the scope and nature of these reform activities, and argues that women were motivated by the central tenets of evangelical republican womanhood to play a significant role in them, and that these activities required women to be involved in the public sphere—both in society in general, and in politics more specifically.

75. Journal, Hoadley Collection, Box 5, The Connecticut Historical Society; LS to Lydia Griffin, 8 November 1833 and L.S. to George Griffin, 18 February 1834; The George Griffin—Lydia H. Sigourney Papers of the William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan; Notebook in Sigourney Manuscripts, The Connecticut Historical Society.

76. I recognize that this list is limited to northern women. I am optimistic that I will be able to demonstrate that southerners like the novelists Augusta Jane Evans (1835-1909) and Caroline Lee Hentz (1800-1856), the diarist Mary Chestnut (1823-1886), and, perhaps, the political economist Louisa McCord (1810-1879) shared many theoretical commitments with their northern sisters. The research of scholars like Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984) and Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, offers some support for this claim.

No one denies that large numbers of free, literate, antebellum Americans, including women, were involved in a host of reform movements purporting to eliminate sin and its practical manifestations. The only real debate relevant to this article is why they were involved and the extent to which women played significant roles in these movements. Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for why Americans joined reform organizations involving notions like “status anxiety,” “social control,” “class conflict,” “psychological assertion,” and the like.⁷⁷ Some have even recognized the important role of evangelical Christianity, although often they considered this to be a mask for something else. This article cannot adequately address the vast literature on the subject, but it can make the basic case that most women reformers were motivated by the basic tenets of evangelical republican womanhood and that they played important roles in reform organizations.

Perhaps the most common criticism of reform activity is that it was a form of social control whereby elites attempted to impose their views on others. It is undoubtedly true that middle-and upper-class men and women were prominent in various reform organizations and that they wanted others to adopt their ideas. But attempting to influence or help people should not necessarily be equated with social control—at least in an invidious sense. Nor were reforms necessarily aimed at the lower classes. For instance, one of the earliest concerns of reformers was the elimination of dueling, something practiced almost exclusively by elites. Likewise, opposition to alcohol was initially focused on the middle-and upper-class members of temperance societies, who took pledges to avoid strong drink. Only later did the movement attempt to win converts among the lower classes and pursue a legal strategy of banning alcohol.⁷⁸ Similarly, the consistent opposition of evangelicals to the unjust treatment of Native Americans can hardly be considered a form of social control.⁷⁹

Although scholars of antebellum reform often focus on reforms that eventually sought legal restrictions on behavior,⁸⁰ most reform movements were in fact simply dedicated to helping people improve themselves. Organizations like the Fatherless and Widows Society, the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans, The Ladies Seamen's Society and the Society for Employing the Female Poor, to name just a

77. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers: 1815-1860*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), ix-xi.

78. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, 81-104.

79. West, *The Politics of Reason and Revelation: Religion and Civil Life in the New Nation*, 171-206.

80. E.g., Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848*; Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865*; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*.

few, existed for no other reason than to help the poor, widows, and orphans. Moreover, women like Catharine Beecher often provided sophisticated discussions of how the indigent might best be aided, noting that indiscriminate aid often does more harm than good and arguing that middle class people should be involved in the lives of the poor rather than simply giving money.⁸¹ One could go on to discuss movements aimed at reforming prisons, mental asylums, schools for the deaf, mute, and blind, and so forth, but the general point that reformers were attempting to improve the lives of all Americans, or to create conditions under which they could improve themselves, should be clear.⁸²

Although exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, scholars have little doubt that large numbers of free, literate women were involved in reform movements.⁸³ But how much influence did they have? Again, while it is difficult to quantify the answer, it is clear that women founded and ran a large number of benevolent associations. Ruth Ginzberg's book, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*,⁸⁴ gives hundreds of examples of women playing significant roles in a variety of reform organizations—although she is more willing to attribute this involvement to self-interest.⁸⁵ Of particular significance, she demonstrated that these organizations were consciously attempting to reform society and that their activities inevitably led them into politics (although it did not necessarily lead women to become suffragists or femi-

81. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, 64-168.

82. Howe, "Religion and Politics in the Antebellum North," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed. Mark Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121-45; *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (1979); and his *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*; Nathan Hatch, "The Second Great Awakening and the Market Revolution," in *Devising Liberty: Preserving and Creating Freedom in the New American Republic*, ed. David Konig (Stanford, Conn.: Stanford University Press, 1998); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971).

83. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, 184; Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*; Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum*; Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of An American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840," *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984): 497-523; Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism: The Woman and the City, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

84. Ruth Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

85. *Ibid.*, 54, 76, 127.

nists).⁸⁶ For instance, up to 50 percent of the funds that benevolence organizations gave to the poor came from state or local governments, and women often petitioned these governments for more funds. Likewise, women had to approach state legislatures if they wanted to incorporate their societies (which generally required a private bill); and they were consistently sending petitions to the government on behalf of the Cherokees, colonization, the Greeks, and so forth. Finally, many women eventually sought legal restrictions on evils such as alcohol, excessive rent increases, cruelty to animals, and slavery.⁸⁷

There is good reason to believe that large numbers of women were motivated by the basic tenets of evangelical republican womanhood to found, join, and run numerous reform organizations aimed at improving the lives of all Americans. Of course one must be careful not to claim too much. Not all women reformers were evangelicals, and evangelical women from different denominations and regions participated in different sorts of reforms. For instance, some scholars have claimed that southern women were far less interested in reform and played less important roles in reform organizations than did women in New England.⁸⁸ However, recent scholarship offers substantial evidence that southern women were actively involved in reform movements. As Elizabeth Varon has demonstrated, women in Virginia did not hesitate to oppose alcohol, fight poverty, or even promote colonization.⁸⁹ Even so, one may admit to some regional distinctions and still offer reasonable generalizations about the political class of antebellum evangelical women.

CONCLUSION

Evangelical women in antebellum America did not generally become feminists. Nevertheless, their political theory and actions must be studied if scholars are to understand antebellum history more fully, and the relationship between evangelicalism and politics during that period, in particular. This project of recovery is important for its own sake, but it also serves the important function of reminding modern scholars about neglected elements of the American political tradition. The political theory of antebellum women was closely related to that of

86. Ibid., 18; see Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840"; Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Anti-Slavery Movement*.

87. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century*, 36-132.

88. E.g. Fox-Genovese, *Elizabeth. Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*.

89. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*.

male Whigs, but their position in society encouraged them to be more critical of the excessive individualism and the inordinate focus on rights that was beginning to characterize the nation. Moreover, while they did not hesitate to promote moral reform, they recognized the limits of politics in this regard. Instead, they focused on strengthening institutions like families, churches, and voluntary societies—institutions whose importance is again being recognized by social scientists.⁹⁰

This essay should encourage scholars to reconsider the role of evangelical Christianity in American social and political history. It is still common for scholars to view evangelicalism as a conservative/repressive force with respect to the role of women in families, society, and politics. While there is some truth to this generalization, I have offered evidence to show that evangelicalism encouraged women to be more, not less, involved in society and politics. Moreover, this advancement came as a result of evangelicalism's core beliefs.

Of course, some scholars might object that evangelical Christianity is still a conservative force because it discouraged antebellum women from making radical critiques of society and politics such as those offered by Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Matilda Joselyn Gage. While this response is undoubtedly true, it loses much of its force if one recognizes that there are alternatives to radicalism or conservatism. Evangelical women in antebellum America were certainly not radicals, but neither were they naïve conservatives. Instead, they developed and promulgated progressive social and political ideas that had an important impact in American history and that are worthy of serious consideration by scholars today.

90. Some modern social scientists are skeptical of evangelicalism's ability to produce social capital because they see many of its institutions as being inward looking. Hence, at best, they produce "bonding" rather than "bridging" social capital (e.g., Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 22, 65-79, 161-62, 408-12). Such analysis underestimates the extent to which many evangelical institutions bring together people from many different races, classes, etc. For instance, few American institutions are as racially integrated as Pentecostal churches. In addition, most evangelical churches participate in a variety of outreach programs aimed at meeting both spiritual and physical needs. On evangelicals and civic involvement, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Robert Wuthnow, "Mobilizing Civic Engagement: The Changing Impact of Religious Involvement," in Skocpol and Fiorina, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, 331-63.