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CATHARINE BEECHER

America's First Female Philosopher and Theologian

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Catharine Beecher was America's first female philosopher and theologian to publish her work in a systematic form.¹ Her books on these subjects are particularly important because they present the foundational principles for the thoroughly Christian world-view that she attempted to articulate in her more than 28 books and numerous articles, pamphlets, stories, and poems. They also shed light on her political and social theory, and informed her many contributions in the public sphere, particularly her promotion of female education.² Yet Beecher has seldom been taken seriously as a philosopher or theologian by academics in general, and Christian scholars have ignored her contributions as a Christian thinker.

In this article I suggest that modern scholars have neglected or dismissed Beecher's intellectual works because they are heavily informed by evangelical Christianity. However, I contend that her philosophical and theological works

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¹I use the terms "philosopher" and "theologian" in a strict sense to denote someone who rationally and systematically addresses the foundational questions of philosophy and theology. Whether or not someone qualifies as a philosopher or theologian under this definition necessarily involves a somewhat subjective evaluation of their work, but the definition is more useful than artificial ones involving membership in philosophical societies or professorships at universities. Obviously American women before Beecher thought and spoke about philosophical and religious issues, but none wrote their reflections down in a rigorous, systematic fashion. There were, however, women who wrote about the Bible or biblical history prior to Beecher, for example, Sarah Hall, *Conversations on the Bible* (1818; reprint, Philadelphia: Harrison Hall, 1827); Susanna Rowson, *Biblical Dialogues Between a Father and His Family* (Boston: Richardson & Lord, 1822). And of course the poetry of women like Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatly, and novels by women like Catharine Sedgwick, dealt with religious themes, but these works are not philosophical or theological in the technical sense of either word.

²I address these issues in detail in my book manuscript, *Beyond Self-Interest: The Political Theory of American Women, 1815-1860*.

merit serious consideration, and that religious scholars who consciously attempt to integrate their faith and scholarship are in a good position to understand them. I also argue, contrary to Beecher scholars who have considered the issue, that she remained an evangelical throughout her life. The last point is important because it corrects the historical record, helps explain aspects of her thought that are otherwise confusing, and sheds light on the evangelical tradition in America.

Religion, especially evangelical Christianity, is relatively neglected by many scholars of antebellum women, and those who consider it often misunderstand it. 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 thought; thus I found it difficult to comprehend her arguments." 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."³ There have been a number of good studies on liberal or radical varieties of Christianity adhered to by women in antebellum America, but to the extent to which these authors consider evangelicalism they often treat it as something that had to be overcome for women to be free.⁴

In recent years, women's historians and students of American religious history have published a number of fine studies that take seriously the religious beliefs and actions of antebellum evangelical women. Particularly good examples of this trend include Katherine Long's study of the revival of 1857-58 and Christine Heyrman's study of the origins of the Bible Belt. Likewise, Julie Jeffrey provides a much needed study of "ordinary women" in the antislavery movement, many of whom were evangelicals (unlike many of the Garrisonian women who have been studied so often).⁵ Of particular note, Catherine Brekus has written an excellent

³Gerda Lerner, ed., *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4; Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 4; Sarah Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 74

⁴E.g., Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (Ithaca: 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), 191; Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996). Ann Douglas examines 30 middle-class women who "were among the leading literary propagandists for a sentimentalized culture" (*Feminization of American Culture*, 80). Of these 30 she identifies 11 (or 37%) 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% of the American population in the nineteenth century (Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 153, 220). Douglas does include Beecher in her sample, but she dismisses her theological treatises as "religiously minded tracts" or "tracts devoted to the causes of liberal Protestantism" (*Feminization of American Culture*, 81, 86).

⁵Kathryn T. Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Begin-*

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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 richness of antebellum evangelical women, but their authors still often agree with my basic claim that these women have been neglected, as suggested by Brekus's claim 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."⁶

Catharine Beecher is often mentioned in books on antebellum women, but usually only to note her advocacy of female education, support of domesticity, and opposition to female suffrage. The few scholars who have looked at her in more detail have tended to focus on these points, almost completely ignoring her philosophical and religious beliefs.⁷ The major exception to this rule is Kathryn Sklar, who has written the definitive biography of Beecher. To her credit, Sklar addresses every book written by Beecher, including her philosophical and religious ones. However, she tends to minimize the significance of religious beliefs, or to assign psychological motives to them, such as when she writes that the Calvinist conception of "rebirth" or "new birth" "enabled men and women to establish psychic contact with their interior self, or at least to resolve contradictions within their sense of self."⁸

One theme of Sklar's book is that as Beecher matured she repudiated most of the major tenets of evangelical Christianity and embraced a vision of society that was only vaguely religious. She argues that by the time Beecher wrote *Common Sense Applied to Religion* (1857), she had translated the concepts of redemption and damnation into "completely social terms," and that God had grown "so remote as to be irrelevant to the workings of the [theological] system." Not only had Beecher "removed morality from the sphere of the church and treated it purely as a social entity," by the 1850s she "saw a clear difference and possible conflict between heavenly and earthly justice and between religious benevolence and social rectitude. In all cases she maintained that the best rule for men to follow was a worldly rather than a heavenly one." As I argue below, I believe that Sklar is wrong with respect to Beecher's moral views—an error that stems from her misinterpretation of Beecher's theology.⁹

nings of the Bible Belt (New York: Knopf, 1997); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 207.

⁷I could not find Catharine Beecher mentioned, even in passing, in any general history of American philosophy or theology. Her works are briefly described in Mary Ellen Waithe, ed. *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 3 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 235-42; and some of them are listed in Else M. Barth, *Women Philosophers: A Bibliography of Books through 1990* (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1992).

⁸Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 38; cf. Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, 143.

⁹Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study*, 242; 13, 247; 49, 78-79, 84, 127, 143, 203, 231, 242, 246-63. Sklar recognizes that Beecher did not completely abandon her childhood faith, noting, for instance, that she "completed her opposition to evangelical dogma while affirming her commitment to its basic thrust" and that her "open attack on the old system actually saved the

Sklar's treatment of Beecher is not without warrant, but as I argue below a more plausible interpretation of Beecher's theological development is that she abandoned the "harsher" tenets of Calvinism while remaining in the evangelical camp. Sklar also considers Beecher's philosophical writings, but she does not think they are very interesting, labeling them "rambling, often contradictory," and "often derivative and imitative."¹⁰ I disagree with this interpretation, but at least Sklar discusses her philosophical works. Beecher's other major modern interpreters almost completely ignore her philosophical and theological writings, as illustrated by Nichole Tonkovich, who does not explore Beecher's theological books much beyond stating that their titles are "emphatically tentative and . . . limited by topics assigned to women" such as "Bible reading."¹¹ But this description only comes close to applying to one title of her four most theological books, and it does not describe the content of any of them. Instead, the books are forceful, opinionated treatises on abstract theological concepts, and in the course of the essays Beecher does not hesitate to criticize males from St. Augustine to Jonathan Edwards. But, as with many contemporary historians, Tonkovich is not really interested in epiphenomenal irrelevancies like theology and philosophy, preferring instead to focus on Beecher's supposed advocacy on behalf of her race, class, and gender.¹²

kernel of its faith" (231, 243). In her most recent essay on Beecher, the only thing that Sklar writes about her religious beliefs is that she "challenged the harsher doctrines of her father's Calvinism" (Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)," in *Portraits of American Women: From Settlement to the Present*, eds G. J. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 169). This is in accord with my conclusion, but it is a more narrow claim than Sklar made in *A Study* in 1973. Because her 1998 essay does not address religion in any detail, it is unclear if she has changed her mind. The only other published scholar to take Beecher's theology seriously is Marie Caskey. Her analysis corrects some of Sklar's claims, (e.g. she recognizes that Beecher criticized Maria Sedgwick, the author of *A New England Tale* [1822], for theological reasons, not because she was a "traitor to her social position and tradition" [Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study*, 44-46]), but like Sklar she concludes that Beecher eventually "aligned herself with Unitarians" on theological matters (except for eternal punishment) (Marie Caskey, *Chariots of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977], 85-88, 99). Caskey errs as a result of her self-proclaimed method of focusing on the "religious experience" of the Beechers instead of their theological works (xi). Other scholars address Beecher's theology in passing, but do not seriously consider it (e.g. Mae Elizabeth Harveson, *Catharine Esther Beecher: Pioneer Educator* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932]; Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century* [New York: Harper and Row, 198]).

¹⁰Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study*, 79, 84. Sklar correctly notes that Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid had an influence on American philosophy in the period in general, but she never specifically defends her assertion that Beecher's philosophy is "derivative." Beecher acknowledged that she read "Locke, Reid, Stewart, Brown and other works in English" before writing her book, but she did not clearly copy her system from any one of them and she had differences with each of them (Catharine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* [New York: J.B. Ford, 1874], 52). It is worth noting that Beecher's work was published four years before Francis Wayland's influential *Elements of Moral Science* (1835; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

¹¹Nichole Tonkovich, *Domesticity with a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 57.

¹²*Ibid.*, esp. 96, 108. And of course there is also sex. I believe the following passage has something to do with the revivals Beecher led at the Hartford Female Seminary: "at the school, practices of affectional discipline sublimated sexual energy into revivalistic fervor; it did not,

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The above noted studies all contribute something to our knowledge of Beecher, but they err by not taking her philosophical and theological writings seriously enough. Many of the authors are inclined to minimize the significance of religious beliefs, and they sometimes lack knowledge of the Bible or theological doctrines that would help illuminate Beecher's works. Religious scholars who make an explicit attempt to integrate their faith and scholarship are in a good position to help remedy these defects. First, they should be more open to the concept of transcendence, and hence have more respect for philosophical and, particularly, theological writings. Second, they should have something like what George Marsden calls an "insider's sensibility" that should help them understand the theological debates that Beecher addressed.¹³ Finally, they should understand how religion can influence people to do things that make little sense from the perspective of self-interest, something that is key for Beecher's thought. But this critique makes sense only if her ideas are worthy of study, and it is to this issue that we now turn.¹⁴

In 1831 Beecher arranged for the private publication of her first philosophical and theological work, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible*. Although relatively few copies were printed and it was distributed privately, it set the stage for her later "speculative" works, including *Letters on the Difficulty of Religion* (1836), "An Essay on Cause and Effect in Connection with the Difference of Fatalism and Free Agency" (1839), *Common Sense Applied to Religion, or the Bible and the People* (1857), and *An Appeal to the People In Behalf of their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (1860).¹⁵ In her later

however, mitigate horseplay of adolescents." But Tonkovich does acknowledge that it "is possible that Beecher was not aware of the erotic overtones" or the "potential for sexual experimentation" presented by female relationships in the school (160, 169). Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelly, and Anne Margolis, in *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Women's Sphere*, argue that Beecher's philosophical and theological conclusions "met a number of Beecher's own needs" ([Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988], 115). Like Tonkovich, but to a lesser degree, they interpret Beecher as an advocate of her class who "recoiled from the broad leveling implications of Christianity" and was not comfortable with the "promiscuous masses" (122, 226, 231). I challenge this interpretation in detail in my book manuscript on the political theory of antebellum women.

¹³George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

¹⁴The above paragraph is not meant to imply anything about the personal religious beliefs of the Beecher scholars discussed in this article. Neither is it meant to suggest that one must be religious in order to understand a religious person like Beecher. The point is simply that scholars who attempt to integrate their faith and scholarship are in a good position to appreciate aspects of Beecher's thought that others might overlook or underemphasize.

¹⁵Catharine Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Experience, Reason, and the Bible* (Hartford, 1831); *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (Hartford: Belknap and Hammersley, 1836); "An Essay on Cause and Effect in Connection with the Difference of Fatalism and Free Agency," *American Biblical Repository* 2 (Oct. 1839): 381-408; *Common Sense Applied to Religion, or the Bible and the People* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1857); *An Appeal to the People In Behalf of Their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1860). Sklar agrees that "[a]ll of Catharine's later thought was based on this [1831] volume of moral philosophy" (Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study*, 78). Beecher systematically addressed moral and religious education in *The Moral Instructor for Schools and Families*:

works she borrowed freely from her 1831 work, although she altered some of her positions as her thought developed. Because of space considerations, I will not attempt to discuss or evaluate the substance of her thought in detail, or consider its development over time. My main concern in this context is simply to demonstrate that Beecher should be studied as a philosopher and theologian.

Beecher began her *Elements* by complaining that "Mental Philosophers" "make a merit of avoiding entirely, the communication received from the Divine Author," and that in doing so they neglect basic questions such as "the object for which the mind is created." On the other hand, works "of a theological nature," neglect to "examine the *nature of mind*."¹⁶ In response to this dualism, Beecher announces her intent to write a book with the object:

1. To describe the nature of the different powers and operations of mind. 2. To show the object for which it was made. 3. To show the mode by which this object can be secured. 4. To show that the mind of man is a disordered one. 5. To show the mode by which it can be rectified, so as to accomplish the purpose for which it was made; to show that this mode is revealed in a communication from its Maker; and to establish the authority of this record. 6. To show the consequences in a future state, of the continued disordered operation of mind. 7. To show the causes why the remedy for the disordered operation of mind, is not more generally secured. 8. To exhibit the mode of training and regulating mind, according to the dictates of experience, reason, and the revealed communication of its Author.¹⁷

In the process of meeting these objectives, she announced that nothing will be accepted that is not "*strictly philosophical*," and that sectarian issues will be avoided so that "all christians who found their eternal hopes upon the Mediation and Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, can cordially unite in all the sentiments presented on these subjects."¹⁸

I quote Beecher's objectives at length because they provide a succinct outline of her book and suggest the systematic nature of her thought. They also illustrate her desire to integrate her Christian faith with her philosophical and theological investigations. Her book follows the outline indicated, beginning with her careful classification and definition of mental phenomena such as "sensation," "perception," "memory," "association," "imagination," "judgement," and "will." After almost one hundred pages of establishing basic definitions, she reached the heart of her book which concerns the regulation of belief concerning "*Truth*," which she defined as "the 'reality of things,' or as another name for '*things as they are*.'"¹⁹

Containing Lessons on the Duties of Life, Arranged for Study and Recitation, Also Designed as a Reading Book for Schools (Cincinnati: Truman and Smith, 1838) and *Religious Training of Children in the School, the Family, and the Church* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1864). She also addressed philosophical and theological issues throughout her other works. For example, in *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), she provided an elaborate discussion of the duties Christians have toward the "sin" of slavery. I discuss this essay in detail in *Beyond Self-Interest*.

¹⁶Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, iv, v. All quotations are exact transcriptions (including emphasis) from the original works unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, v.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 92.

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Beecher was an ontological realist, but she recognized that truth was sometimes difficult to know. She taught that beliefs may be true or false, and that one of the primary tasks of philosophy is to distinguish between truth and falsehood. To do this, it is first necessary to understand the difference between intuitive and rational truths. The former, which she sometimes called "*primary truths*," are the principles of common sense. She listed nine of these, which are summarized here to help demonstrate the systematic nature of her thought: (1) our perceptions may be trusted, (2) memory may be trusted, (3) consciousness may be trusted, (4) personal identity continues, (5) every effect has a cause, (6) the mind of man is a free, independent agent, (7) "contrivance is proof of an intelligent cause, and the nature of a contrivance indicates a design of the contriver," (8) things will be in agreement with past experience, (9) "we are obligated not to destroy happiness or cause pain."²⁰

Beecher explained and argued for each of these principles, but it is not necessary for our purposes to explore her arguments in detail. It is useful, however, to note her basic test for determining the validity of an intuitive truth:

Any truth is a principle of reason, or an intuitive truth, when all men talk and act as if they believed it in the practical affairs of life, and when talking and acting as if they were not believed, would universally be regarded as evidence that a man had 'lost his reason'.²¹

Somewhat ironically, her list of 11 intuitive truths in this book is slightly different from her list of nine truths in her 1831 book (one would, of course, expect them to always be the same), but there is substantial overlap between them. The primary difference is that her 1857 list focuses more on religious and moral issues than epistemological ones. For instance, in the later book she offered two proofs for God's existence instead of one.²²

For Beecher, intuitive truths are not implanted on a human mind, they must be learned. She taught that there are four sources of knowledge: (1) personal experience, (2) experience of others, (3) process of reason, founded on experience, (4) revelations from the Creator.²³ In *Elements*, and in later books on religion, Beecher provided an elaborate account of what can be known through experience and reason alone. In doing so she showed, at least to her own satisfaction, that the above noted intuitive truths could be demonstrated to any person. At times Beecher applied her epistemological method to metaphysical issues, but she was far more likely to apply it to moral ones. She was very concerned with under-

²⁰*Ibid.*, 92-101.

²¹Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, 15.

²²In 1831 Beecher argued that God's existence was evident from design, and as an example she mentioned the classic argument about a savage finding a gold watch, which any reasonable person (savage or not) would conclude had a maker. In 1857 she argued that the first intuitive truth is that the universe was "caused" by "*some great self-existent Cause, who never began to be, and who is the author of the universe matter and mind*" (*Common Sense Applied*, 17). She then returned the argument from design for her fourth intuitive truth, which she this time explicitly connected to William Paley who made a similar argument in *Natural Theology* (London: 1802) (*Common Sense Applied*, 19).

²³Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 156.

standing the proper duties of men and women. Her moral views cannot be discussed in detail here, but they deserve comment because they show the close relation between her philosophical and theological beliefs.

Beecher joined most Christians in arguing that God created universal moral rules that must be followed by all men and women. She occasionally referred to these rules as the laws of nature or natural law, and she thought most of them could be discovered by reason alone, but their ultimate foundation is the will of God. Because these laws could be discovered by reason, "in the teachings of Confucius, Zoroaster, Guadama, Solon, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and the Antonines, who are among the chief heathen sages, we can find nearly all the moral duties of man." As noted above, Beecher taught the fundamental principle of morality was that "we are obligated not to destroy happiness or cause pain."²⁴ This principle has caused confusion among some students of Beecher, who have suggested she became a utilitarian or an advocate of largely secular social gospel.²⁵ However, she was quite clear that morality must be understood in light of "the Holy Law of [God's] kingdom, which is the unchanging statute of his will, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and they neighbour as thyself'" which is "the sure and infallible directory" to happiness. Individuals who follow this law choose actions that "produce the greatest amount of *general* happiness, irrespective of [their] own individual proportion."²⁶ This happiness is always defined from an eternal perspective. As she explained in her well-known advice manual, the goal of life for an individual 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*."²⁷

²⁴Beecher, *An Appeal to the People*, 240; Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 101.

²⁵Esther Bruland, for instance, notes that Beecher was "developing a form of rule-utilitarianism" and refers to her as "[s]omewhat utilitarian" (Esther Byle Bruland, "Great Debates: Ethical Reasoning and Social Change in Antebellum America—The Exchange Between Angelina Grimke and Catharine Beecher" [Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1990], 264, 246). As noted above, Sklar thinks Beecher came to treat morality "purely as a social entity" (Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study*, 13, 247).

²⁶Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 248, 250.

²⁷Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: T.H. Webb, 1841), 157-58, 264. Some students of Beecher conclude that because she talked about God creating men and women for happiness, she obviously moved far away from, in the words of Mae Harveson, "the inexorable tyrant, Calvinism, whose iron hand rested oppressively on men's souls, squeezing out the lighter, more buoyant joys of life and leaving only the heavy sense of all-pervading sin," or, in the words of Milton Rugoff, "the tyrannous character of the Calvinist God" (Harveson, *Pioneer Educator*; Rugoff, *The Beechers*, 7). Yet the first point of both the shorter and longer Westminster catechisms is that the chief end of man is to "glorify God, and to *enjoy* him forever" (italics added). Beecher specifically noted that her discussion of happiness is in complete agreement with the above quotation (Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, note B). However, she did not mention that the quote is from the shorter catechism, perhaps leading readers unfamiliar with the Westminster catechisms to overlook the connection. Of course scholars do not need to agree with Beecher that glorifying God can be enjoyable, but they should recognize that she thought it could be. At a minimum, this would keep scholars from identifying her as a utilitarian simply because the concept of happiness plays a role in her moral theory.

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Beecher referred time and time again to the moral requirement that individuals practice self-denying benevolence. Her use of this concept reflects her debt to the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and to American theologians like Jonathan Edwards.²⁸ She discussed benevolence in detail throughout her work, and it plays a very important role in her political theory. I examine this role elsewhere, but the important point for this article is that she defended her moral views on both philosophical and theological grounds. Significantly, she believed that men and women could know most of their moral duties without reference to divine revelation, but she taught that revelation, specifically, the Bible, is necessary for knowledge of many theological truths. It is particularly critical for understanding the nature of salvation and for providing the proper motivation to live morally.

Throughout her works Beecher argued not only that belief in God is rational, but that unbelief is irrational. She offered a variety of proofs for God's existence, notably Aristotle's argument from a first cause and Paley's watchmaker argument. She also contended that it is rational to suppose that God would communicate to men and women through the written word, and that this revelation would be verified through miracles. Beecher supplied a number of arguments for the veracity of Christian revelation, ranging from historical ones based on the early church fathers to rational ones based on the C.S. Lewis-like claim that the disciples would have to be "fools or knaves" to die for a falsehood. In addressing these issues, particularly the possibility of miracles, she specifically attacked David Hume and philosophers who deny their validity. Moreover, she offered reasons for why textual variations found in different Hebrew and Greek manuscripts are not significant, and for why we can have confidence in the English translation of the Bible (although she admitted that it is best to study the scriptures in their original languages).²⁹ Whether or not her arguments are convincing is not the point here—although it should be noted that Christian writers continue to make arguments related to those used by Beecher. The significant point is that she did not simply assume that God exists or that the Bible is God's word, she argued for these (and other) positions.³⁰

Beecher taught that reason and experience offer bases for belief in the exis-

²⁸Beecher referred to Edwards throughout her works and specifically claimed that her moral views are compatible with the ones he presented in his *Dissertation concerning the end for which God created the world* (1765), which, along with *The Nature of True Virtue*, contain discussions of happiness and benevolence (Beecher, *An Appeal to the People*, 204). Beecher and Edwards almost certainly had significantly different views of benevolence, but that is not at issue here (George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth Century America* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970], 32-39; Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981]).

²⁹Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 175-242.

³⁰Beecher's arguments, especially in her 1836 *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion*, are reminiscent of modern apologetical works as diverse as C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); and Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

tence of God, moral standards, an afterlife, and revelation, but not much else. Revelation is necessary to provide knowledge of salvation and to give people a motivation to act morally. Contrary to recent Beecher scholars, this motivation was not simply the existence of hell, a doctrine to which Beecher did indeed assent. But she also argued that "fear alone is not a healthful stimulus," and that "the most powerful of all motives in securing obedience to law is that of *love*." This is true for parents, and it is true for God, as "the most powerful of all influences in securing virtuous action, is the principle of love and gratitude toward some noble benefactor, who saves from some terrible evils at the expense of great personal suffering and sacrifices, and who seeks his reward in the pleasure of redeeming those thus benefited, from the snares and ruin of sin."³¹ Thus the example of Jesus Christ's self-denying love, which is knowable only through the Bible, provides the main motivation to live a virtuous life.

Beecher's theological beliefs are discussed in more detail in the next section. This section has merely attempted to show that her works contain serious theological discussions and that these discussions play an important role in other aspects of her thought. But was her theology original? No one has ever attempted to argue that her *theology* was derivative, but anyone familiar with the period will recognize its kinship to "New Haven Theology" or "New School Presbyterianism," which her father was instrumental in shaping and promulgating. But, simply noting this similarity does not mean her work is derivative—it is after all possible that her work helped shape, differed from, or contained more powerful statements of New Haven Theology. Again, these issues cannot be resolved here. The important point here is that she was a theologian, and, as the next section shows, an evangelical one.³²

Modern students of Beecher who consider the issue in any detail agree that she left the evangelical faith and embraced a form of the social gospel that was only vaguely Christian. In this section I argue that she abandoned some of the "harsher" tenets of Calvinism but remained firmly in the evangelical camp. Her religious beliefs informed all of her writings and her life's work. It is important to recognize this point if we are to understand Beecher's thought, place in American history, and contributions as a Christian—or, more narrowly, evangelical—thinker.³³

³¹E.g. Caskey, *Chariots of Fire*, 99. Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, 39-41; *An Appeal to the People*, 186, 241.

³²Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*, esp. 31-58. Catharine Beecher was well acquainted with leading New Haven theologians other than her father. For instance, she used to spend weeks at a time in Nathaniel Taylor's home, engaging him in theological debates and discussing her latest theories (Harveson, *Pioneer Educator*, 53). George Marsden and Leo Hirrell both ignore Catharine Beecher in their fine studies of New School Calvinism (Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*; Leo Hirrell, *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998]).

³³In addition to historical accuracy, identifying Beecher as an evangelical lends support to Mark Noll's argument that evangelicals have not always been, nor need to be, anti-intellectual (Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994]). Despite Noll's goal of paying fresh attention to women and other neglected groups in his fine book,

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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 1823 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. This definition is broad enough to include Christians from a variety of denominations and worship styles, but narrow enough to exclude groups like Catholics, Unitarians, transcendentalists, Mormons, and radical free-thinkers.³⁴

Catharine Beecher was born into an evangelical family, the first daughter of the famous Congregational (later Presbyterian) minister Lyman Beecher. Lyman was a paradigmatic example of the Calvinist current of the Second Great Awakening with its revivalism, emphasis on social reform, and de-emphasis on theology. He was an advocate of New Haven theology, which moved away from some of the harsher tenets of traditional Calvinism. Yet he always claimed to be a Calvinist, and by all accounts he took his faith seriously. His intense attempt to convert Catharine, which according to Lyman required a long period of angst as one comes to grips with the fact that unregenerate humans can do nothing to please God followed by a euphoria of recognition that God has elected one to become a saint, contributed to Catharine’s later rejection of the distinctive tenets of Calvinism. Yet there is little doubt that he also helped instill in her, like all of his children, a powerful desire to serve God.

Catharine never had the sort of conversion experience her father expected, but

A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada, he completely ignores Catharine Beecher’s theological writings, noting only that she strove to increase “educational opportunities for women” (1, 184). Perhaps this is because he thinks the Scottish Enlightenment had such a pernicious influence on American evangelicals (Mark Noll, “The Irony of the Enlightenment for Presbyterians in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (1985): 150-75; *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 57-107).

³⁴Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* 2 vols., ed. Barbara Cross (1864; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 411-18; cf. Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2; John West, *The Politics of Reason and Revelation: Religion and Civil Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 7. Of course evangelicals were not a monolith. Especially noticeable are differences related to denomination and geographic region. However, it is possible to generalize about evangelicals as a whole (Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, xiv-xx). Mae Harveson claimed that Catharine repudiated her father’s theology as presented in the sermon noted above, but she only provided evidence showing that she abandoned the harsher tenets of Calvinism, not the basic tenets of evangelicalism (Harveson, *Pioneer Educator*, 150-51). Beecher made an explicit attempt to identify the doctrines that distinguish “Evangelical sects” in *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (330-33). Her definition is very similar to that of her father’s, but I use his as a baseline because it was (and is) far better known. It is interesting to note that in 1836 she considered most Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Orthodox Quakers, Dutch Reformed, Associate Reformed, and German Reformed to be evangelical; Universalists, Unitarians, Catholics, and, perhaps, “Hicksite Quakers and Campbellite Baptists,” to be non-evangelical. Finally, she professed insufficient knowledge or understanding of the Swedenborgians, Mormons, and Shakers to determine whether or not they were evangelical (*ibid.*, 331).

she clearly considered herself to be an evangelical Christian. She led revivals at the Hartford Female Seminary, joined her father's church in 1826 (which means that he considered her to be a Christian), clearly identified herself as an evangelical, and defended the basic tenets of evangelical theology throughout her works.³⁵ But she did reject many of the distinctive tenets of Calvinism, which leads her modern interpreters to conclude she rejected more than she did. Space constraints do not allow for a full consideration of all of Beecher's interpreters' errors or for a presentation of all of the evidence that she was an evangelical. Accordingly, I focus on several key issues and primarily cite her later works because scholars argue that she moved away from her evangelical faith.

The key to Beecher's theology is her distinction between "the *doctrines* of religion, and the *philosophy* which explains *how* they are consistent with reason, and with each other."³⁶ She considered the distinctive tenets of Calvinism to be primarily philosophical explanations of doctrinal truths, and she forcefully rejected these explanations. For instance, modern Beecher scholars make much of her rejection of the doctrine of total depravity and suggest that she thought infants were born good and that through proper education they could be brought up free from sin. But Beecher clearly acknowledged the "*fact*, which both experience and revelation agree in teaching, is that man, as a race, is guilty and depraved in *action*, and that from the earliest periods of life this *depraved action* is manifested."³⁷ Moreover, she agreed that in some sense all people are sinful because of Adam's sin. Thus she did not disagree with the evangelical doctrine that everyone sins, just the Calvinist explanation (which she traced back to Augustine) that Adam's sin is imputed to all men and women and that humans are incapable of doing good in God's sight.³⁸

Likewise, Beecher rejected the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace, arguing instead that individuals have the ability to choose or reject God's offer of salvation. She acknowledged, however, that becoming a Christian is "the result of that aid from the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, which both parents and children so need that they can never succeed without it, and yet which is promised to all who earnestly

³⁵(Caskey, *Chariots of Fire*, 92-93; Beecher, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion; Religious Training of Children*, 345).

³⁶Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 322; Beecher, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion*, 250.

³⁷Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, 289.

³⁸Beecher specifically agreed with Paul's statement in Romans 5 that "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; that death comes on all men because all sin; and that by one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (*Common Sense Applied*, 291-92). Also see *Common Sense Applied*, 252, 281-336; *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 255-73, esp. 266. In letters printed in her book, *Religious Training of Children*, she more clearly argued that infants are born sinless and should be considered "young Christians," but she also acknowledged that all people will sin and stated that they must repent from their sins and make some sort of personal commitment to Jesus Christ. In this work she also noted that she had been called a "Pelagian," and that she accepts the label if by it her critics mean one who believes infants are born innocent (267-68, 274, 286-87, 330-31, 382-84; *Common Sense Applied*, 297).

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desire it, and seek it by proper methods."³⁹ Thus the Holy Spirit plays a necessary role in salvation, although humans have something to say about it as well.

The Holy Spirit plays a necessary role in salvation, but Jesus Christ is key for Beecher's soteriology. As she wrote in her last book, "the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ was needful to secure redemption to our race from sin and its penalties, is the revealed fact."⁴⁰ Beecher believed that Jesus Christ was both God and man, and that his death on the cross was necessary for men and women to be saved. As she put it in one of her discussions of the doctrine of the atonement, "*Jesus Christ came into this world to save men from sin and its inevitable penalties, by his teachings, sufferings and death . . . [he] wrought out the salvation of those who are saved, by his advent, sufferings and death, and that they could be saved by no other mode.*"⁴¹

Beecher was very clear that salvation is possible only because of Christ's work on the cross, but she occasionally answers the question "what must I do to be saved?" in a manner that suggests a works-based salvation. For instance, in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, she wrote that "efforts and self-denial, for the good of others are to be regarded, not merely as duties enjoined for the benefit of others, but as the moral training indispensable to the formation of that character, *on which depends our own happiness both for time and eternity.*" Moreover, when she discussed the necessity of faith, she made a point of emphasizing, in the words of the Apostle James, "that faith without works is dead."⁴²

It is undoubtedly the case that Beecher emphasized the necessity of moral training and doing good works more than many evangelicals would. She did so for two reasons. First, she was reacting against Calvinist theories of moral education, which according to her held that unregenerate children can do absolutely no good so there is no need to teach them right from wrong except to help convict them that they are totally depraved. Once a child is convinced she is a sinner, the Calvinist must respond: "it is good you recognize this fact, but unfortunately you cannot do anything about it." The child must then hope that she is one of the elect. While one would be hard pressed to find a Calvinist willing to articulate this theory of moral education, it is clear Beecher believed that she was brought up in this fashion and that it is a logical implication of Calvinism. It is also clear that she and many of her siblings and peers reacted against this view of moral education.⁴³

³⁹Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 96, 375; *Common Sense Applied*, 329. Note also the implicit rejection of the doctrine of limited atonement in the above quotation.

⁴⁰Catharine Beecher, *Miss Beecher's Housekeeper and Healthkeeper* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), 416.

⁴¹Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, 373-74. The above two paragraphs also help show that Beecher believed in the trinity and the humanity/divinity of Christ, doctrines she defended against Unitarian attacks throughout her life (see especially *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion*).

⁴²Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 159, emphasis added. Catharine Beecher *The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: Their Causes and the Remedy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846), 26.

⁴³Beecher, *Religious Training of Children*; Rugoff, *The Beechers*.

Second, Beecher was responding to the revivalism that swept the nation during the Second Great Awakening, revivals that she and her family played a significant role in leading. Like many reflective Christians, she came to question the value of revivals, noting in 1857 that

revivals were times when God, the Holy Spirit, gave people new hearts; that, when revivals came, it was best to read the Bible, and pray, and go to meetings, but that at other times it was of little use. This last was not taught, but was my own inference.⁴⁴

In response to the easy-believism of revivals, she began to insist that “faith without works is dead.” In practice, this means that in addition to having an intellectual faith one must strive to obey “all the physical, social, and moral laws of God” as one’s “chief end or ruling purpose.”⁴⁵

From an evangelical perspective, Beecher’s answer to the question of “what must I do to be saved?” is at times uncomfortably works-oriented. Yet when all of the relevant passages are read carefully and together, it is clear that she believed (1) everyone sins, (2) we must repent of our sins, (3) reconciliation with God is possible only because of Christ’s death on the cross, (4) salvation is possible only through faith in him, (5) the Holy Spirit plays a necessary role in the salvation process, (6) Christians should live moral lives.⁴⁶ She often blended these things together, and she certainly emphasized the responsibility of people to live morally, but in the final analysis she was quite clear that “we are saved ‘not by works of righteousness but by faith’.”⁴⁷

Beecher continued to articulate an evangelical doctrine of atonement and salvation late in her life, but as her interpreters note she dedicated fewer pages to these issues in her later works. One reason for this, as Beecher herself pointed out, is that she wanted her books to be read by a diverse audience and to be adopted by public schools. She therefore attempted to avoid sectarian issues, generally focusing on what can be known through reason and experience alone, or on what can be agreed upon by all Protestants.⁴⁸ Evangelicals may be uncomfortable with

⁴⁴Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, xvii.

⁴⁵Beecher *The Evils Suffered*, 26. Beecher, *Common Sense Applied*, 158. Her views in this regard are related to those of modern advocates of “Lordship Salvation,” such as Kenneth Gentry (Kenneth L. Gentry, “The Great Option: A Study of the Lordship Controversy,” *Baptist Reformation Review* 5 [Spring 1976]: 49-79) and John MacArthur (John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* [Dallas: Word, 1993]), both of whom are clearly considered to be evangelicals.

⁴⁶E.g., Beecher, *Religious Training of Children*, 77, 236, 331. The following passages help illustrate Beecher’s view of atonement and salvation: Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 222-23, 248-49, 322-28, 380-81, 442-43; *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion*, 131, 142-45, 196, 288-91, 233; *The Evils Suffered*, 26-28; *An Appeal to the People*, 157-59, 191-92, 240-41, 262-65, 293, 373-74; *Miss Beecher’s Housekeeper and Healthkeeper*, 372-75, 416-23. It is in the context of these passages that Beecher’s occasional seemingly unorthodox claims about Christ must be understood (e.g. Catharine Beecher, *Woman Rights and Woman’s Profession* [Hartford: Brown and Gross, 1871], 171; Catharine Beecher to Leonard Bacon, August 21, 1877, Beecher-Dutton Letters, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).

⁴⁷Beecher *The Evils Suffered*, 26.

⁴⁸E.g., Beecher, *The Moral Instructor*, preface; *Common Sense Applied*, xxxiv-v; *Woman Rights and Woman’s Profession*, 82-86.

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this strategy, but it does not necessarily indicate that she left the faith any more than the very few references to Jesus Christ in William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* means he is not a Christian.⁴⁹

There are three other arguments offered to support the contention that Beecher defected from evangelicalism that should be briefly addressed. One is, in the words of Boydston, et al., her "uncontrolled attack" on male clergy in books like *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (1850) and *An Appeal to the People In Behalf of Their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (1860).⁵⁰ I would suggest, however, that in these works Beecher is attacking specific clergy who she feels have done wrong and that she is simply asserting the great Protestant principle that ordinary people can interpret the Bible for themselves—something quite common during and after the Second Great Awakening.⁵¹ The second, and related argument, is her attack on "sectarianism," but there is hardly anything unevangelical about this. Finally, her interpreters make much of her "belated departure" from the evangelical tradition when she joined the Episcopal Church in 1862.⁵² Yet the Episcopal Church of 1862 was not the Episcopal Church of 2000, and if one defines evangelicalism primarily in terms of its doctrinal distinctives, there is no reason to conclude that she ceased to be an evangelical because she joined this denomination.

The main burden of this section has been to show that there are very good reasons for concluding that Beecher remained an evangelical Christian throughout her life. This point is important for a number of reasons. First, it helps correct the historical record. Second, as I explain in detail elsewhere, her evangelical beliefs inform other aspects of her world view—notably her political theory. Finally, Beecher is fine example of a Christian thinker who made a conscious attempt to integrate her faith with her life's work. We miss an important part of the Christian and, more specifically, evangelical, tradition in America if we do not recognize her as a self-consciously Christian thinker.

The subtitle of this article states that Catharine Beecher was America's first *female* philosopher and theologian. This claim obviously raises the issue of whether her gender influenced her ideas. I believe that it did, but in a more nuanced way than is often imagined by students of antebellum women. Beecher's gender did not lead her to attack the existence of hell, the exclusion of women from formal ministerial positions, the submission of women in marriage, or the denial of suffrage to women, but it did lead her to rethink the role of women in society and politics.

In this article I have attempted to show that Beecher should be taken seriously as a philosopher and theologian, and that she remained an evangelical throughout her life. I have also tried to say something about the relationship between faith

⁴⁹William Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

⁵⁰Catharine Beecher, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: A Narrative of Recent Transactions involving Inquires in regard to the Principles of Honor, Truth, and Justice which obtain in a distinguished American University* (New York: printed for the author, 1850). Boydston, et al., *The Limits of Sisterhood*, 230; Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, 143-44.

⁵¹Beecher, *An Appeal to the People*, 356; Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁵²Caskey, *Chariots of Fire*, 99.

and scholarship. My claims in this regard are not intended to exclude anyone from any conversation, but rather to suggest that scholars who attempt to integrate their faith and scholarship are in a good position to appreciate aspects of history that others might overlook or underemphasize. In Beecher's case, such an approach has hopefully helped begin the process of recovering a significant but underappreciated American philosopher, theologian, and evangelical.

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