



Catharine Beecher's Moral Theology

Morgan Esterline

“A lady should study—
not to shine, but to act.”¹

Catharine Beecher (1800–1878) thrived in the “domain of men”: religion, philosophy, and social politics. As an educator and author, she wrote more than twenty books as well as numerous essays, articles, and poems. Her expansive writing astonished both male and female readers, leading to financial success and multiple opportunities to lecture across the United States. She set a precedent for women’s involvement in public discourse, becoming part of the 19th-century American feminist intellectual heritage.² She conversed with a public sphere that limited women’s influence to the home; ironically, the same sphere she claimed women should not enter. Her view of a robust, well-rounded education for women was aimed at enabling them to better fulfill their societal role as mothers.

Works like her *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females* emphasize this conviction while bringing to light the apparent incongruity in her beliefs. Beecher supported both women's subordination and educated involvement in the public sphere.³ She was simultaneously traditional and radical; Christians who believe in women's equal partnership and authority in society, church, and the home may gain much from her life and her writings while acknowledging her blind spots.

Beecher was the eldest of thirteen siblings, and eleven years older than her sister, famed abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896). Her mother died when she was sixteen, so she took on the responsibility of the household until her father remarried the following year.⁴ A Presbyterian minister, her father established a familial interest in social activism and religion. As a result, her siblings and half-siblings would go on to become suffrage leaders, abolitionists, and pastors. It was a time of profound cultural change in the United States: she was born in the days of American slavery and lived to see it abolished.⁵

In the nineteenth century, education for girls started at home and was focused primarily on social skills and manners rather than math, science, or literature, affirming these to be “male domains”. Beecher, however, attended the Litchfield Female Academy, founded by Sarah Pierce (1767–1852). There her education included disciplines traditional for girls and young women, as well as a careful blending of the “ornamental arts”⁶ with academic topics.⁷ Pierce's educational philosophy and intellectual curriculum provide context for Beecher's understanding of women's roles and responsibilities. At the age of twenty, she readily disagreed with her fiancé and father's interpretations of theology, causing tension in their relationships until her fiancé's untimely death in 1822.⁸

She never married, choosing instead to dedicate herself to education, and continued to interpret the Bible for herself and encourage other women to do the same.⁹ Having studied Latin, philosophy, and mathematics, she did not shy away from difficult topics. As she began to write more and more, she argued for a unifying, Protestant moral code in *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* and for free will in an essay in the *Biblical Repository*.¹⁰

With the inheritance she received from her fiancé and the support of wealthy local wives, Beecher and her sister Mary opened Hartford Female Seminary in 1823. In her words, “the intelligent and influential women came to my aid and soon I had all I sought.”¹¹ Carrying forward the impact of the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840), she went on to lead revivals at the seminary. Thanks to the success of the seminary and Beecher's influence, several states opened women's colleges, adding to the educational opportunities of women everywhere.¹²

Beecher was a paradox, holding a mix of both traditional and non-traditional beliefs. She believed women needed comfortable clothes that didn't restrict movement, regular exercise, and knowledge about homeopathic methods to ease mental and physical pain caused by female anatomy, like menstrual cramping. She advocated for women to receive sex education, covering topics like contraception, menstruation, and childbirth. At the same time, her radical support for women's education was based on culturally traditional beliefs that women have an innate moral superiority and thus a responsibility to teach other women as well as children.¹³ Women, she argued, should be kind, peaceful moral leaders for husbands and children (the boys as future voters and politicians and the girls as future moral leaders). To fulfill this role, women needed “as good” of an education as men.¹⁴

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Beecher also contributed to contemporary theology. It is common for antebellum scholars to frame evangelical women, including female preachers, as social reformers rather than theologians—as rebels rather than curious thinkers. Scholars like Barbara Epstein and Sarah Evans interpret anger at subordination as the reason for women’s religious engagement in the 1800s.¹⁵ Dr. Mark David Hall, however, takes Beecher’s beliefs seriously, naming her “America’s first female [systematic] philosopher and theologian.”¹⁶ In her theological essays, she fearlessly critiqued highly influential male theologians “from St. Augustine to Jonathan Edwards,” writing “forceful, opinionated treatises on abstract theological concepts” and social issues.¹⁷ She criticized the damage from church structures that allowed the harassment of women without disciplining the men. Hall corrects an interpretation of Beecher’s beliefs as evidence of her leaving evangelicalism, claiming instead that she “abandoned the ‘harsher’ tenets of Calvinism while remaining in the evangelical camp.” She then “intertwined Calvinist thought—particularly the notions of submission,

self-denial, and self-sacrifice—with Common Sense philosophy.”¹⁸

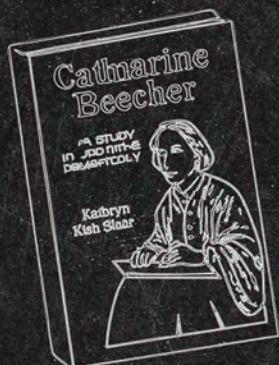
Theologians, she believed, often do not recognize the basic nature of human minds as philosophers do. Some knowledge is simply common sense that all are capable of learning. Personal experience is a useful tool for learning because, while humans are sinful, most morality is learnable through reason, as demonstrated by the moral goodness in other philosophers and religions. Sin-inclined humans still contain human goodness and make free choices, even though they need salvation to be righteous in the sight of God. Therefore, they should have the freedom to learn.¹⁹ Philosophers, on the other hand, all too often ignore the theological nature of human minds as created by a divine author. As such, they miss out on the reason why people should live moral lives: because of Christ’s redeeming love that saves us from sin. They also miss that living a moral life is not enough to gain true happiness, which comes from God. Thus, some knowledge is only revealed through God’s revelation, and it is God’s law that

reveals our moral obligation to not “destroy happiness or cause pain.”²⁰

Beecher reminds philosophers, theologians, and us that it is only through seeking after others’ happiness, obeying God’s command to love our neighbors as ourselves, that we experience happiness. Our “own happiness both for time and eternity” depends on doing good works for others, since a faith without works is a dead, fruitless faith. She implored evangelicals who have faith to follow God’s Law and practice holiness, combining theological and moral concerns.²¹ In her poem “Psalm CXXXIX [or 139],” she cries out:

*O search me, Lord! and know my thoughts, forbid my feet to stray, But lead me from the paths of sin to everlasting day.*²²

Catharine Beecher was a radical thinker and theologian who revolutionized women’s educational opportunities and the philosophy behind loving our neighbors. The moral issues of her time differ from ours, but we must continue to recognize how theology impacts others in practice.



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She saw the harm caused by slavery and women's lack of education and worked to expand women's opportunities even within the assumption of gender hierarchy. We would do well to learn from her profound impact while taking the fight for women's equality even further.

Notes

1. Gladys S. Lewis, "Moral Philosophy and Curricular Reform": Catharine Beecher and Nineteenth-Century Educational Leadership for Women," *Forum on Public Policy Online* 2009, no. 2 (2009): 4.
2. Catherine Villanueva Gardner, "Heaven-Appointed Educators of Mind: Catharine Beecher and the Moral Power of Women," *Hypatia* Vol. 19, no. 2, (2004), 3.
3. "Catharine Beecher" *CT Women's Hall of Fame*, <https://www.cwhf.org/inductees/catharine-beecher>.
4. Debra Michals, "Catherine Esther Beecher," *National Women's History Museum*, 2015, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/catharine-esther-beecher.
5. Lewis, 9–12.
6. The "ornamental arts" include needlepoint, drawing, painting, music, and assorted hospitality skills deemed appropriate for women to maintain their ornamental status. Jennifer C. Core and Janet S. Hasson, "Female Education and the Ornamental Arts in Antebellum Tennessee," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, <https://www.mesdajournal.org/2019/female-education-and-the-ornamental-arts-in-antebellum-tennessee>.
7. Litchfield Historical Society, "Litchfield Female Academy History," *The Ledger*, https://ledger.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org/ledger/studies/history_lfa.
8. Lewis, 3.
9. Lewis, 11.
10. Lewis, 9.
11. Lewis, 4.
12. Lewis, 1–3.
13. Lewis, 6.
14. Gardner, 2.
15. Hall, 66.
16. Hall, 67.
17. Hall, 68.
18. Lewis, 10; Gardner, 2.
19. Hall, 71–72.
20. Hall, 76–77.
21. Hall, 77.
22. Brett Nelson, "Catharine Beecher (1800–1878)." *Forgotten Poets*, February 2, 2020. <https://forgottenpoets.wordpress.com/2020/02/02/catharine-beecher-1800-1878>.



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