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# The Theological and Political Evolution of Henry Ward Beecher

Tim Hutchinson
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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TIM HUTCHINSON, B.A.
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Henry Ward Beecher [1813-1887] "was the most influential minister in America and one of the leading molders of public opinion of his day."[1] A romantic, a progressive, an idealist, "Beecher was as much the embodiment of nineteenth century America as Walt Whitman..."[2] He was one of the great orators of his time or any time. With his background firmly rooted in American Puritanism, it is ironic that he would be praised as a leader of liberal thought in America. Years after Beecher's death, Harry Emerson Fosdick would comment that whenever we preach freely to sympathetic audiences the social gospel..., we are building on foundations that Mr. Beecher helped to lay."[3] John W. Buckham said that next to Horace Bushnell, Beecher was "the greatest liberator of American theological

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[1]Henry F. May, Protestant Churches and Industrial America (New York: Octagon Books, 1977), p. 67.

[2]Ibid.

[3]J. H. Tweksbury, ed., Henry Ward Beecher As His Friends Saw Him (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1904), p. 157.

thought."[4]

Beecher was sentimental, emotional, self-indulgent, at times callous but usually warm hearted, generous, a liberal and yet a social conservative. He brought flamboyance, humor and politics to the pulpit. Beecher "leavened his discourses with copious amounts of comedy."[5] He retorted to those who criticized his humor that "if laughing is a sin, I don't see what the Lord let so many funny things happen for."[6] Beecher's humor often disarmed hostile audiences.

In spite of his critics, none could deny his popularity or his influence. After assuming the pastorate of the infant Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, his church as well as his influence grew rapidly. In 1862 his congregation numbered 1,460. In the next decade the church almost doubled in size, adding more than 1,000 new members. Beecher's church with nearly 3,000 communicants stood as an impressive exception to the average Congregational church in the country which had fewer than 100 members. Webber in his extensive History of Preaching in Britain and America

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[4]William G. McLoughlin, The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher, An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 40.

[5]Marie Caskey, Chariot of Fire, Religion and the Beecher Family (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 237.

[6]Thomas W. Handford, ed., Beecher: Christian Philosopher, Pulpit Orator, Patriot and Philanthropist (Bedford, Clarke and Company, 1899), p. 148.

observes that "more than one prominent authority in those days did not hesitate to describe him as one of the greatest (preachers) in the history of the Christian church."[7]

The first half of the twentieth century saw a great erosion in the esteem with which this man was for many years regarded. Wagenknecht notes that "he has suffered...from the reaction against nineteenth century (and Romantic) enthusiasm and the consequent inability of much of his posterity to distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality."[8] While enduring a temporary loss of esteem, Beecher has always been synonymous with great preaching. Beecher was the first Yale lecturer on preaching and deserved the honor. "He knew how to meet an audience head-on and lift it higher."[9]

The official organ of Boston Unitarianism, The Christian Examiner, in 1860 praised Henry Ward Beecher as "a leader of liberal thought in America."[10] But did Beecher with all of his influence make any lasting contribution to American thought? McLoughlin answered this question when he

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[7]F.R. Webber, A History of Preaching in Britain and America (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1957), p. 360.

[8]Edward Wagenknecht, Ambassadors for Christ, Seven American Preachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 68.

[9]Warren Wiersbe, Walking With the Giants (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 204.

[10]McLoughlin, p. 41.

said that Beecher effected "a workable marriage between romantic, idealistic, individualistic aspects of Christianity."[11] Beecher's influence was not esoteric. He was practical, down-to-earth and understood by the common man. This was the source of his political power.

It was not merely church-going Americans who listened to Beecher's every pronouncement. Beecher's response to John Brown's raid spoke for thousands of Republicans, and he represented a major part of the anti-slavery crusade in the United States.

Beecher believed that the sphere of the pulpit included all vital issues of life. He never flinched from political issues. He was not above accepting a leave of absence from his pastoral post in order to campaign for his preferred candidate. He brought a spirit of morality to politics. In an age noteworthy for its political deals and smoke-filled rooms, Beecher stood for ethics in government. He once said, "Let the hand of discipline smite the leprous lips which shall utter the profane heresy, 'all is fair in politics.'"[12]

Beecher was an eternal optimist. He once said in Plymouth Church, "I believe that the human race is being swept in vast aerial circles toward better climes and nobler

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[11]McLoughlin, p. 68.

[12]Henry Ward Beecher, Lectures to Young Men (New York: M.H. Newman and Company, 1853), p. 43.

societies." He went on, "The irresistible power of God is carrying the universe upward and onward to its final perfection and glorification."[13] This optimistic vision included the political process. No war, no crime, no social evil could quench his optimistic spirit. He stands in a long line of utopians. At times he seemed almost carried away by his own eloquence. In one sermon he exulted, "The day shall come when there shall be no more oppression, but when, all over the world, there shall be a common Bible, a common God, and common peace and joy in a common brotherhood."[14] Politics was a means to usher in this utopia.

But if he was a utopian, he was a worldly utopian. I mean by this that he was actively involved in partisan politics. He lobbied on legislative issues. He left his pulpit for extended periods to lecture across the country on political issues. He was remarkable not only for his idealism but for his pragmatism.

Beecher was not the theologian that his father Lyman was but he could reason and reason well. Pattison observes, "Intuitive rather than dogmatic or argumentative, he was so far at the mercy of his audience that what he gave to them he first got from them; he received the vapor and

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[13]Clifford E. Clark, Henry Ward Beecher, Spokesman for a Middle-Class America (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 191.

[14]Handford, p. 148.

returned the flood."[15]

He was a champion of the common man, and common people responded to him. He fought the battle of the slave, the oppressed, and the overworked. He was so generous to the poor that one lady in his congregation said, "When we get to the last pinch, we can always help any one by getting at Mr. Beecher.[16]

The sermons and lectures of Henry Ward Beecher reveal a gradual yet unmistakable evolution in both his theology and his political thought. This lasting influence on history is worth examination. His influence was both religious and political. It has been said of him that his influence upon religious thinking in America was greater than that of all the theological seminaries put together.[17] His politics was a seed of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. This thesis will examine Beecher's transition from rural conservative to urban liberal, the correlation between his theological and political thought, and his lasting political impact on America.

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[15] C. Harwood Pattison, The History of Christian Preaching (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1903), p. 371.

[16] Pattison, p. 371.

[17] Wagenknecht, p. 68.

## CHAPTER II

## A BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

Henry Ward Beecher was a product of his age. He was molded by the attitudes and perceptions of Mid-Victorian America, and he became a leading spokesman for it. His contradictory and paradoxical statements and positions at first seem inexplicable. Closer examination reveals that Beecher's life was in flux. His values shifted radically from early adulthood to middle age. "Nor was Henry's shift in values ever complete or consistent. Like many Americans in the Mid-Victorian period, he was in passage between a rural society with its isolation and hidebound traditional values and burgeoning cities much more exposed to the winds of change."[18] If one is to understand Beecher, one must recognize his evolution from a social, religious, and political conservative to an outspoken religious and political liberal. His was not a conversion but an evolution.

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[18]Milton Rugoff, The Beechers, An American Family in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 377.

"Responding gladly to the liberal theological currents which were abroad, he evolved an emotional, optimistic theology that exactly suited his needs and talents."[19] He became known as the "Apostle of Optimism." He was not always an optimist though.

Early in his life he wrestled long with the rigid and pessimistic puritanism of his father. Henry Ward Beecher's gradual rejection of his father's world view caused the elder Beecher to speculate aloud "as to why Henry would stray so far from the faith once delivered to the saints."[20] Henry's theological and political evolution correspond to some extent to his geographical location. In the rural setting of frontier Indiana, he preached "lively sermons against drinking and gambling."[21] Years later to a more sophisticated and urban congregation these moral shibboleths would almost entirely disappear from Beecher's preaching.

Henry had a craving, a longing for acceptance and popularity. This desire is reflected clearly in his preaching. "He never wasted much time or strength in beating up against wind and tide. He felt for the current and found it."[22] The traditional role for the minister

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[19]May, p. 68.

[20]Caskey, p. 246.

[21]Webber, p. 359.

[22]Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher, An American Portrait (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. 62.

and that espoused by Henry's father was that of instructor and persuader. Henry forsook this view. Indeed in the area of instruction, he almost reversed it. He said to his brother Charles, "Preach little doctrine except what is of mouldy orthodoxy...popularize your sermons."[23] This is not to say that Beecher had no underlying principles. He did! But he could read an audience in a remarkable way and would tailor his message so as to be assured of a good reception.

There is a revealing story about Henry's youth. At age fourteen, Henry attended Mount Pleasant Institution at Amherst, Massachusetts. While there, he was greatly influenced by a professor from West Point named W. P. Fitzgerald. Once when Henry was in the middle of a blackboard demonstration, Fitzgerald suddenly cried, "No!" Henry started over again, but at the same point came another icy "No!" Henry sat down in confusion. The next boy was stopped at the same point with a similar "No!" but he went right on and was commended. "Why," whimpered Henry, "I recited it just as he did, and you said 'No!'" Fitzgerald responded, "Why didn't you say 'Yes' and stick to it? It is not enough to know your lesson. You have learned nothing till you are sure. If all the world says 'No'--your business is to say 'Yes' and prove it."[24] Beecher would only do this when the time was opportune.

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[23]Hibben, p. 111.

[24]Rugoff, p. 121.

Beecher anticipated which way a crowd was going and led the chorus. This is not to say that Beecher was without moral courage or unchanging principles. But regardless of the importance of the issue, Beecher never pushed it until he was certain that the congregation, by and large, was receptive to his viewpoint. One of Beecher's contemporaries, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, analyzed him well when he said of Beecher, "The popular drift befriends him. His equivocal position as minister of an orthodox Congregational society makes him attractive to both conservatives and liberals. Nothing radical enough to shock the former, nor conservative enough to displace the latter. He retains people of all descriptions."[25] He remarkably retained popularity with most segments of the population throughout his career. His more liberal theological views cost him some followers and his good reputation was tarnished by the Tilton adultery trial. He did, however, sustain a broad popularity. It was as if people felt that to reject Henry Ward Beecher was to reject their own Victorian morality which he represented. Most refused to do this. Beecher is worthy of study only when we recognize his pragmatism as a means to further the political beliefs and goals which he held deeply.

Henry Ward Beecher was born in 1813, the son of the famous revivalist Lyman Beecher. The Beecher family was one

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[25]Hibben, p. 108.

of the most famous and influential of the nineteenth century. Henry was born the eighth child among thirteen in Litchfield, Connecticut. His education was characterized by rigid discipline. He was by Beecher standards a slow learner. He was only three when his natural mother died. For the rest of his life he would cling to adoring memories of his loving mother. His father remarried. Henry found his step-mother, Harriet Porter, cold and unapproachable. While she was pious and religious, Henry felt alienated and intimidated by her religious commitment. He never received the warmth and love he craved from her. "Henry reached manhood with two frustrating images of women: one of a loving mother who had been carried off too soon and the other of a substitute mother who had proven unapproachable."[26]

His educational attainments were not notable. He was graduated from Mount Pleasant Institution in 1830. He won no academic honors. However, his elocutionary skills were already being recognized. The next year Henry's father sent him to Amherst College. Amherst was only nine years old, had only six professors, and was thoroughly orthodox. Lyman sent Henry to Amherst rather than his old alma mater, Yale, because of its smaller classes. He hoped this would be beneficial considering Henry's academic problems.

It was near the end of his freshman year that Henry

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[26]Rugoff, p. 117.

first met Eunice Bullard. After a seven year long courtship, they married. The Bullards were of staunch Puritan stock. Henry was graduated from Amherst in 1834. Of the thirty-nine graduates, he was one of the few who played no part in the commencement exercises. His greatest academic interest in college was the Athenian Society, a campus debate club. The qualities later to make him famous were already being honed. The traits which would characterize his long career were becoming evident: eloquence, love of an audience, a desire for approval, and a strong distaste for Calvinism. The political liberalism he would champion was yet to emerge.

Henry's father, Lyman, had assumed the presidency of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Henry had made a commitment to the ministry and it was natural for him to attend Lane. Upon his graduation from seminary in the spring of 1837, he immediately accepted an invitation to be considered for pastor of a small Presbyterian church in the frontier town of Lawrenceburg, Indiana. He was called to pastor this church. It was an inauspicious beginning. He later said that his flock "consisted of twenty persons. Nineteen of them were women and the other was nothing."[27]

Henry was already restive in the confines of orthodoxy. He faced the ordination council of the presbytery with deviousness. He feigned orthodoxy, gave the "right"

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[27]Rugoff, p. 254.

answers, and was duly pronounced orthodox without a dissenting vote. Thirty years later he would proudly recall his deception.

Henry stayed in Lawrenceburg for two years. He was criticized for his lack of visitation but was praised for his preaching. In May of 1839, Henry received a call to serve as minister in the new Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. Indianapolis was only a little more of a city than Lawrenceburg with less than four thousand inhabitants. It was nonetheless the capital of Indiana and a definite step up for the Beechers.

In Indianapolis life was hard and wages low. Henry thrived but Eunice was exceedingly unhappy. She complained continually of the hardships and the unhealthy conditions in the town. Rugoff described Beecher at this point in his career as a "middle of the roader" in his political positions.[28]

Beecher followed the 1840 presidential campaign of General William Henry Harrison with special interest. Always a keen observer of the political process, Beecher had a greater than usual interest in this campaign because he had become personally acquainted with General Harrison when Harrison lived in North Bend, Indiana, and Henry was still in Cincinnati, Ohio. General Harrison was pro-slavery and won overwhelmingly. When Harrison died a month after his

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[28] Rugoff, p. 263.

inauguration, Henry was asked to deliver an address at the memorial service. Beecher's support of Harrison is not so much evidence of his political affinity with Harrison as it is his personal loyalty to a friend.

In Indianapolis, Henry developed a lifelong love of nature and a passion for gardening. He became the editor of the Indiana Farmer and Gardener in 1844. This experience as an editor would be valuable in his later work in New York. Nature would occupy an important place in Beecher's thinking. "Indeed, the natural world, from the cycle of the seasons to the magic of a single flower, became for him as convincing proof of God as he needed."[29]

It was in the winter of 1843-44 that Henry preached his famous series of seven lectures to young men. He dealt in these messages with a broad range of youthful vices. He took for his themes; idleness, dishonesty, lust for wealth, dangerous men, gambling, prostitution and popular amusements such as horseracing and the theater. His Seven Lectures to Young Men was Henry's first published book. It remained throughout his lifetime his most popular book. By it Henry "was established in the public eye as a trenchant critic of social evils."[30] Webber notes that "his lively sermons against drinking and gambling were based upon thorough acquaintance with local conditions and he did not hesitate

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[29]Rugoff, p. 263.

[30]Caskey, p. 232.

to speak to the wrongdoer in language he could understand."[31] Indeed, Beecher was criticized for too great a familiarity with those vices he condemned. The consequences that Beecher pronounced as a result of these vices were more social than spiritual. The seven lectures represent Victorian standards more than Puritan standards. They reflected Victorian values more than the values of his father. "The sins that once led to damnation and hell have here become vices leading to sickness, disgrace, failure and the gallows."[32]

These seven lectures are revealing of Beecher's perspective at this point in his evolution. The views he expressed concerning the theater, dancing, drinking and even immorality would be greatly modified through the years. But it is this book that preserved Beecher's popularity among conservatives for many years after Henry had left the orthodox fold. More revealing than the positions stated in the Seven Lectures is his attitude. The spirit of the lectures is far different from that which would characterize his later preaching. Altina L. Waller correctly perceives this when she observes that "Beecher did not stress the understanding and forgiveness that were later to become the

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[31]Webber, p. 359.

[32]Rugoff, p. 269.

heart of his preaching."[33]

Beecher's political thought at this time was not developed, and his political comments were minimal. During his Indianapolis years, Beecher was extremely cautious on the subject of slavery. While loudly renouncing prostitution--who was not against sin?--he conspicuously avoided any sermons on slavery. He defended his silence by saying, "I knew that just as sure as I preached an abolition sermon, they would blow me up sky high, and my usefulness... would be gone."[34]

After several years pastoring in Indianapolis, Beecher began to attract attention from larger urban congregations. A church in Brooklyn, New York, invited him to serve as its pastor. Beecher accepted the invitation and began his work in Brooklyn in 1847. Now in his thirties, he began to implement with greater freedom his own ideas concerning the purpose, organization, and function of the church. On the first Sunday after his arrival, with a self-confidence born of ten hard years on the Indiana frontier, he declared his independence. He said, "I want you to understand distinctly that I will wear no fetters: that I will be bound by no precedent...."[35]

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[33]Altina L. Waller, Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton, Sex and Class in Victorian America (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 25.

[34]Rugoff, p. 272.

[35]Ibid., p. 368.

During the decade following his arrival in Brooklyn, he moved farther and farther from his Calvinist roots. He discarded the doctrine of original sin, a wrathful God, and the need for a distinct conversion experience. He began to minimize the value of formal theology. He was only half joking when he said to a seminary student that theology was all right as long as he didn't take it seriously.

In 1849 his church building burned down. This provided Beecher the opportunity to construct the new one according to his own ideas. One feature of the new church auditorium was that the platform was thrust out into the congregation. Beecher wanted the people to surround him. He had the traditional pulpit opened up so he could move about. The church prospered and in its heyday was the most famous church in America.

He avoided the slavery issue for awhile but the force of events was too much. So, in 1850, in an article entitled "Shall We Compromise?" he renounced slavery because it "destroyed the family, degraded honest labor, deprived the black man of his humanity and was motivated by greed and lust."[36] Beecher's opposition to slavery was based partly on natural law and the Constitution. He refused to accept the Negro as less than human and argued that slaves were protected constitutionally. But the principal basis of his abolitionist views was moral and religious. He railed

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[36]Rugoff, p. 374.

against the greed of slave traders and the immorality of tearing apart black families.

In the political campaign of 1856, Henry, with the full consent of his church, threw himself into the contest with all of the force of his being. "He preached and spoke and wrote constantly and vehemently. He was universally recognized as a very potent factor in the rapid growth of Republican sentiment."[37] He took pains to avoid identifying with radical abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison. Beecher could in his sermons call slavery a spiritual outrage. But he would undercut his radicalism by counseling moderation. He assaulted the Fugitive Slave Law and argued that it commanded men to break the laws of God. The Fugitive Slave Law provided for the return of escaped slaves and established stiff penalties for aiding a slave's escape or interference with a slave's recovery. Beecher contended that obedience to the Fugitive Slave Law caused people to disobey God's moral laws and thus commit sin.

Beecher's role of spiritual firebrand and social moderate caused him to espouse contradictory positions--sometimes even in the same speech or article. He asked his congregation to send Sharps' rifles to those on their way to join Free-Soil settlers in Kansas. He cried, "Rifles are a

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[37]Henry Ward Beecher, Patriotic Addresses, The Development of Civil Liberty in the U.S. (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1891), p. 88.

greater moral agency than the Bible."[38] The rifles were shipped in boxes labeled "Bibles" and soon became known as "Beecher's Bibles." He soon became identified as a fervent abolitionist. But he was not. He could still say, "As they cannot be free, will not be free for ages, is it best that bitter discontent should be inspired in them, or Christian quietness and patient waiting?"[39] Beecher was the master of the dramatic gesture. He would stage a slave auction from the platform of Plymouth Church, and the emotions he inspired usually exceeded his own moderate counsel.

Another issue that was just beginning to penetrate the public consciousness was that of women's rights. Henry was sympathetic to and eventually endorsed this movement. During the Civil War Beecher assisted Susan B. Anthony in raising funds, and in 1866 speaking at the Woman's Rights Convention he was unequivocal in his endorsement of suffrage for women. Beecher's own relationship to his wife seems to have been barren. Many public statements indicate a lack of domestic happiness. Later the women's rights movement would split and Beecher allied himself with the moderate wing. Beecher's position on women's rights will be discussed further in chapter five.

Beecher supported the war effort vigorously. In June of 1863, he traveled without his family to Europe. He gave

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[38]Rugoff, p. 381.

[39]Rugoff, p. 381.

a series of lectures on the Civil War and is credited by many historians for turning British public opinion in favor of the North. Oliver Wendell Holmes said that Beecher was "a more remarkable embassy than any envoy who has represented us in Europe since Franklin...."[40]

In 1865, Beecher began his first and only novel, Norwood. It appeared in installments in the Ledger. Henry was motivated by the $24,000 advance and possibly by jealousy of his famous sister's (Harriett Beecher Stowe) success. It took him four years to write and while not a literary masterpiece, it does reveal much of Henry's outlook on life.

Following the war, Henry was able to turn his attention to new areas. "In the decade after the war, Beecher became the most conspicuous spokesman for those clergymen who were trying to define and remold the traditional Christian message."[41] Beecher's faith became known as "Evangelical Liberalism." It was a response to the intellectual and social changes that seemed to threaten Protestant orthodoxy. As Beecher gradually moved away from orthodox theology, criticism increased in both volume and intensity. Caskey observes that "at no time prior to 1875 would Beecher's numerous critics be able to muster organized attacks on his

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[40]Earl A. French and Diana Royce, eds., Portraits of a Nineteenth Century Family (Hartford, Connecticut: The Stowe-Day Foundation, 1976), p. 115.

[41]Clark, p. 182.

theology, and then only in relation to its alleged moral tendencies."[42] Beginning in the early 1870's there were persistent allegations concerning Beecher's relationship to female members of his congregation. Theodore Tilton, a long-time friend of Beecher, formally accused Beecher of committing adultery with his wife. The accusations were made in 1874 and culminated in the famous Tilton v. Beecher adultery trial. This scandal received nationwide publicity for months. Beecher never publicly confessed his guilt. Historians are divided as to the validity of the charges. It was Henry's habit to visit the Tilton home daily. This practice continued even when Theodore Tilton was out of town. The Tilton residence was Henry's home away from home. Though many were convinced of Henry's guilt, Plymouth Church stood squarely behind its pastor. "The great majority of those who supported him refused even to consider the possibility that the model of all their moral values might be a seducer of other men's wives."[43]

Beecher's preaching during this phase of his evolution indicates that he had abandoned the absolutist morality of his Calvinistic background. Waller in her study of the Beecher-Tilton affair declares that "Beecher never seemed to doubt that such highly evolved moral individuals should be released from the arbitrary constraints of social

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[42]Caskey, p. 232.

[43]Rugoff, p. 491.

institutions and tradition...."[44] He considered himself such a "highly evolved moral individual." Among the social institutions from which he felt released was marriage. Waller suggests that in the area of moral standards, "instead of reason, he recommended emotion; instead of organized religion, love; instead of duty, spiritual affinity."[45] Beecher clearly felt that he did not have such an affinity with his wife, Eunice. It is clear that while Beecher's transformation was gradual, it was complete. Henry Ward Beecher, the author of the puritanical Seven Lectures to Young Men, now found himself hailed by the nation's free-love advocates. "Victorian Americans could not bring themselves to question his innocence because to do so would undermine many of their most cherished values...."[46] To doubt Beecher's innocence was to accuse him not only of infidelity but also hypocrisy. This in turn would seem to cast doubt on many of the values that he had exalted.

Into his sixties there was no diminution of his zest or power. Great crowds continued to flock to him. His own congregation regarded him as almost superhuman. To them Henry Ward Beecher was bigger than life and was not bound by the moral standards that constrained ordinary people. In

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[44]Waller, p. 29.

[45]Waller, p. 29.

[46]Clark, p. 225.

one period of 135 days, he delivered 132 lectures speaking to almost half a million people. He was guaranteed between $600.00 and $1,000.00 per lecture. He was financially secure as he entered the closing period of his life.

Rugoff calls these sunset years of Beecher's life--"Changing Gods." He did not really change gods when he turned sixty-five, but there did seem to be a greater boldness, openness and there was more ridicule of orthodoxy. Perhaps it was the Tilton affair with the attendant criticism from conservative quarters that brought about this new attitude. Whatever it was that triggered it, it was the culmination of many years of gradual change. In 1877 he preached a Fourth of July sermon declaring his independence from the orthodox interpretations of the fall and the atonement. The political symbolism of the Independence Day sermon was clearly linked to his new religious attitude. In declaring his theological independence from orthodoxy he seemed to liberate himself politically as well. "He spoke freely now, liberated by age and by a record of challenges met and overcome."[47]

In 1882 he endorsed the theory of evolution. He said, "I am an evolutionist and that strikes at the root of all medieval and orthodox modern theology. Men have not fallen as a race. Men have come up."[48] In 1885, at seventy-two

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[47]Rugoff, p. 511.

[48]Ibid.

years old and a law unto himself, he bitterly, scathingly attacked the old doctrines. The old theory of sin, he said, is "repulsive, immoral and demoralizing."[49]

In 1886, Henry visited England a second time. Gray haired, venerable, still fresh and alive, he met a cordial reception. After his return to Brooklyn on March 3, 1887, he suffered a stroke and died a few days later. As his body lay in state, more than 50,000 mourners passed by. Warm tributes poured in from everywhere, a testimony to his influence and personal magnetism.

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[49]Rugoff, p. 511.

## CHAPTER III

## INFLUENCES

There were many influences that contributed to the making of Henry Ward Beecher. Probably the greatest single factor molding Beecher's character was the compelling influence of his father, Lyman. Waller contends that the Beecher home "was a place of fear, judgment, and stern retribution.... Beecher reacted by rejecting not only what he saw as an incomprehensible theology but the father and siblings responsible for his suffering."[50] McLoughlin, while acknowledging that a psychobiographer of Beecher would make much of Henry's relationship with his father, argues that Henry's rebellion against his father "reflected the rebellion of a whole generation of Americans against the teachings of their fathers."[51] Waller's description of the Beecher household as "conditional and judgmental" may be logically deduced if not dogmatically affirmed. It was, to be sure, typically puritanical. It was not though, as the militant atheist Robert Ingersoll declared, "a puritan

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[50]Waller, p. 20.

[51]McLoughlin, p. 38.

penitentiary."[52] In a sermon in 1883 Henry told his congregation how his father had comforted him when he had a painful toothache. Henry recounted:

> I went into my father's room, and he put his hand upon my head, and with tones of great kindness and love said, "you have got the toothache, my dear boy! Come get in with me and cuddle down by my side," how that filled me with affection and such gladness that I forgot the toothache. It was quite lost and gone. I slept.[53]

Beecher used this anecdote to illustrate "The Rest of God." How much time, sentimentality, and a desire to make his point may have colored his recollection is problematical. It is evident though that Beecher's memory of his childhood was not completely negative. The Beecher household was one of the most remarkable families of the nineteenth century. "Historians who have studied the various children of Lyman Beecher agree that this controversial minister was also a domineering father who irrevocably shaped, for better or worse, the lives of his children."[54]

The second great molding influence in Henry's life was not a person but a doctrine--the teaching of evolution. Beecher testified that "slowly and through a whole fifty years, I have been under the influence, first obscurely,

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[52]Caskey, p. 208.

[53]Ibid., p. 209.

[54]Waller, p. 20.

imperfectly, of the great doctrine of evolution."[55] "The only difficulty for Beecher with Darwin's theory was the reluctance of the public to accept it."[56] While Beecher rather early in his ministry incorporated the evolutionary perspective into his teaching, he consciously delayed a public embrace of the doctrine until the 1880's. It was not until then that he felt the public would be responsive to the doctrine. At that time he said, "It has now been sufficiently demonstrated that the divine method of creation was utterly different from this [old notion of instantaneous creation]...."[57] In 1885, he published his series of lectures entitled Evolution and Religion. It was in these lectures that he proclaimed himself "a cordial Christian evolutionist."[58] Richard Hofstadter in Social Darwinism in American Thought notes the significance of Beecher's conversion to the doctrine--when "the most important pulpit in the United States was brought within the evolutionary ranks."[59]

Beecher rejected the idea that the apparent conflicts between evolution and evangelical Christianity would destroy the latter. He said, "I hold that evolution, so far from

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[55]Handford, p. 183.

[56]Clark, p. 262.

[57]Handford, p. 176.

[58]McLoughlin, p. 50.

[59]Hofstadter, p. 29.

being in antagonism with true religion, will develop it with more power than any other presentation of science that has ever occurred in this world."[60] Hofstadter claims that Beecher's effort at "the reconciliation of religion and science," was his greatest theoretical contribution. He argues that in Beecher's lectures on evolution, he presents "a carefully elaborated distinction between the science of theology and the art of religion: theology would be corrected...but religion as a spiritual fixture in the character of man would be unmoved."[61]

While an increasing number of church leaders were finding Darwinism and its social interpretations compatible with theism, it was Beecher's conversion to the doctrine that was a kind of watershed. One Darwinian who especially influenced Beecher was Herbert Spencer. "Beecher publicly acknowledged Spencer as his intellectual foster father."[62] Henry's esteem for Spencer is evident when he said, "Spencer will be found to have given the world more truth in one lifetime than any other man that has ever lived in the school of philosophy."[63] In 1882 at a banquet honoring Spencer, Henry proclaimed that he had studied the British

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[60]Pond, p. 95.

[61]Hofstadter, p. 29.

[62]Ibid., p. 29.

[63]Handford, p. 174.

philosopher for twenty years. In 1886 he wrote to Spencer and spoke of the "fruitful and quickening" influence of Spencer's writings on American Society."[64] Spencer's influence and impact on Beecher was great. Beecher's embrace of social Darwinism was crucial in the development of Beecher's world view. It was social Darwinism that provided a scientific basis for Beecher's gospel of optimism and hope. The influence of social Darwinism on Beecher is examined in more detail in chapter nine.

Beecher, as was often the case, both led in and reflected the changes taking place in American society. He reflected those changes fairly early in his ministry by adopting the evolutionary perspective. He only led in these changes late in his life when he publicly expounded on the controversy. The magnitude of his popularity combined with the force of his personality allowed him to lead even when he espoused ideas much later than lesser public figures.

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[64]Hofstadter, p. 31.

## CHAPTER IV

## BEECHER'S PREACHING

It might be objected that a section on a person's preaching has no place in a political science thesis. But it was preaching that made Beecher a giant on the American political landscape. It is also true that in Beecher's preaching philosophy and style, his outlook on politics and life in general is reflected.

"Some [of his contemporaries] assure us that he was an orator of entrancing eloquence, highly dramatic, and with a power that no audience could resist."[65] While not all would accept that evaluation, all do agree that Beecher was unconventional and extremely sentimental. He was so unconventional that he helped to establish a new style of preaching. He avoided pretentiousness. He escaped the monotonous homiletic style which characterized so many nineteenth-century public speakers. Beecher, as the most popular and successful preacher of his day, developed what he called a "natural" style of preaching. He was never

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[65]Webber, p. 360.

accused of being wooden or stilted. Henry was about five feet, nine inches tall. He was rather bulky, his eyes large and his complexion ruddy. His face "took on unusually vivid and varied expressiveness as he came under the influence of different moods and emotions.[66] Some accused him of flamboyance. But flamboyant or not, he was contagiously enthusiastic.

Beecher never allowed logic or a lack thereof to hinder him from making his point. On one occasion, when his brother Edward gently reproved Henry for taking two opposing and hostile positions within only a few minutes and challenged him to make a choice between them, Henry replied that he believed both, to the delight of his audience and the complete consternation of Edward.[67]

Similarly, Beecher was averse to systematic theology and rarely spoke on theological themes. Lewis Brastow in his book Representative Modern Preachers says that "he spoke on no subject that he had not studied. But he was wholly averse to systematic theology and could often make it a subject of ridicule."[68] The fact that he spoke contemptuously of theology should not lead one to the conclusion that he was ignorant of theology. In fact, he

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[66]Wagenknecht, p. 70.

[67]Caskey, p. 230.

[68]Lewis O. Brastow, Representative Modern Preachers (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1904), p. 102.

had examined the chief theological systems of his day and was familiar with them.

His oratorical ability was perhaps demonstrated best in his Civil War speeches in England. There he faced howling mobs and continuous interruptions. A lesser speaker would have been vanquished. But Beecher's lucid defense of the Union won many of the British over and earned the respect of all who heard him. Whether preaching or lecturing, Beecher always spoke with few notes. "He was not a close nor accurate thinker according to the standards of logic but he was a strong and aggressive thinker."[69] He insisted that it was the duty of the preacher to speak out on moral, social and political questions but he added in his Yale lectures, "if you make your ministry to stand on them, it will be barren. It will be rather a lectureship than a Christian ministry."[70]

He was a practical preacher. He advised that "an abstract truth which exists only in the realm of the intellect has apparently for Jesus Christ no interest.... The only Christianity which Jesus Christ inculcated was applied Christianity."[71]

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[69]Brastow, p. 125.

[70]Lionel George Crocker, Henry Ward Beecher's Art of Preaching (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 37.

[71]Batsell Barrett Baxter, The Heart of the Yale Lectures (New York: MacMillan Company, 1947), p. 136.

He was a popular preacher. This was true not just in that he had a large following but in that he labored to be liked. Popularity was his goal. Waller detects this when she says, "His father's primary concern was to be right while Beecher's was to be popular."[72]

He was a positive preacher. Few negative themes can be found among his sermon topics. Growth, hope, power, beauty, and joy appear and reappear in Beecher's sermons. He believed "the minister should concentrate on that knowledge which everybody would admit and reiterate it with excited heart and feeling."[73] Beecher sought to inspire in his preaching hope and aspiration.

He was a humorous preacher. He broke new ground in the use of humor in his sermons and lectures. He was criticized for it but most people loved it. He could laugh at himself and that endeared him even more to his people. Sometimes he used humor to arouse interest, sometimes to make a point and sometimes to disarm the hecklers. In speaking to a very unsympathetic audience in London, he defended the Union's position in the Civil War powerfully. He used humor to defuse a potentially explosive situation. The following exchange was included in Alexander McClure's book on famous

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[72]Waller, p. 26.

[73]Ibid., p. 25.

orations. Beecher said:

> If the South should be rendered independent--(at this juncture mingled cheering and hissing became immense: half the audience rose to their feet, waving hats and handkerchiefs, and in every part of the hall there was the greatest commotion and uproar). You have had your turn now: now let me have mine again. (Loud applause and laughter) It is a little inconvenient to talk against the wind: but after all, if you will just keep good-natured--I am not going to lose my temper; will you watch yours? (applause) Besides all that, it rests me, and gives me a chance, you know, to get my breath. (applause and hisses) And I think that the bark of those men is worse than their bite. They do not mean any harm--they don't know any better. (Loud laughter and applause.)[74]

But more often, Beecher used humor to make his point. At one lecture Beecher ridiculed the usual style of the pulpit by terming it "the sacred mahogany tub--plastered up against some pillar like a barnswallow's nest."[75] This statement of Beecher brought laughter, made his point and demonstrates how effective Beecher was in the use of satire.

Beecher preached to an entire nation as completely as any man would prior to the advent of radio. He was gifted with the ability "to present the most advanced thought of his generation in easily understood language and to stamp it

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[74]Alexander K. McClure, Famous American Statesmen and Orators (New York: F.F. Lovell Publishing Company, 1902), p. 214.

[75]Marshall P. Wilder, ed., The Wit and Humor of America (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1907), p. 221.

indelibly, by means of word pictures, upon the minds of his listeners."[76] His abilities were used not just to build a large urban congregation but to move a nation politically.

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[76]Frank N. Magill, ed., Great Lives From American History (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Vol. I, 1987), p. 175.

# CHAPTER V

## BEECHER'S RELIGIOUS FAITH

It is essential to examine Beecher's religious beliefs. They are thoroughly interrelated with his political beliefs. His faith did not merely affect his politics, it formed the entire framework for his political views. This chapter will examine Beecher's changing views concerned creeds, the Scriptures, the nature of man, orthodoxy, divine retribution, Christology, Calvinism and the social gospel.

### The Essence of Religion

In a detailed study of the Beecher family, Marie Caskey comments that "Henry's theological development, despite his depiction of it as highly individualized and original, followed the lines along which American liberal theology was developing."[77] The liberalizing theology which characterized Beecher included a conviction that religious truth could be perceived intuitively. There was in his theology an appeal to experience rather than reason, a stress on human consciousness and an emphasis upon a Christocentric vision.

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[77]Caskey, p. 229.

These characteristics were true of Beecher's theology from his twenties to his seventies, from Indianapolis to Brooklyn. But while these traits were always there, they show continual development and refinement during his career.

Beecher, as we shall see, had little use for formal theology. He cared little for, indeed scoffed at, church creeds. He was reared in a thoroughly religious home. He attended schools pervaded by a revivalistic atmosphere. His childhood years were typical of a Presbyterian minister's son. He cut his teeth on catechism questions. It was assumed that he would enter the ministry. This emphasis upon creeds, doctrine, revivals, and personal conversion was not rejected suddenly by Beecher but incrementally over the course of a lifetime. In an 1870 sermon entitled "The True Religion," Beecher summed up his idea of what religion should be when he said, "The essence of religion is love to God and love to man."[78] This and this alone was Beecher's creed.

## Creeds

Beecher believed church creeds to be unproductive and divisive. While as a young man he passed his ordination examination and was declared orthodox, he seemed to have no deep convictions concerning the doctrines he affirmed.

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[78]Henry Ward Beecher, The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth Church, Fourth Series (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1871), p. 172.

Early in his ministry while espousing the cardinal doctrines of Christianity, he determined never to be a stickler on points of church order. In 1840, "he cordially agreed to a grand union baptism with his fellow ministers and personally baptized his Presbyterian converts by sprinkling, affusion, or immersion in the White River, whichever they felt to be the Scriptural mode."[79] He was criticized for his participation in this service. It is mentioned in this paper because this event set the direction of his later ministry. His early determination to avoid controversy on points of church order would later in his life be expanded to include every area of doctrine. For instance, in 1840 it was a bold step that Beecher took in refusing to be dogmatic on issues such as baptism. By 1870 he would be far bolder in saying that he was not dogmatic on basic tenets of orthodoxy such as human sinfulness. In 1869, Beecher said, "Be not afraid that you will not be orthodox. Be God's and then you will be orthodox. Whatever the churches may say, grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Then, whether you measure more or less than the creeds call for, you will be sure to be on the right ground."[80]

Beecher was reared in a strongly anti-Catholic environment. Beecher reflected this sentiment in his early

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[79]Caskey, p. 226.

[80]Beecher, Third Series, p. 33.

preaching. Later, in rejecting the usefulness of creeds, he acknowledged that even Catholicism provided light. He said in an 1870 sermon on "The Moral Constitution of Man," "I do affirm that the faith which is held by all sects of Christians is in the main a guide and a light. It might not be a better light, but it is a light."[81]

Beecher considered creeds as constraining. They were like prison walls that separated and isolated the churches and denominations from each other. He was an early ecumenist. He pleaded for ecumenism a century before the movement blossomed.

In the freedom of old age, Beecher became even bolder in his rejection of creedalism. "Henry decided in the 1880s to relegate those ideas (creeds) to the category of relics of spiritual barbarism."[82] He opposed all didactic creeds saying they were "husks that conceal the corn."[83]

Beecher emphasized applied Christianity. In his Yale lectures he pointed to early Christianity as evidence to support his position. He said, "It is historically true that Christianity did not in its beginning succeed by the force of its doctrines, but by the lives of its

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[81]Beecher, Fourth Series, p. 312.

[82]Caskey, p. 244.

[83]Robert Shaplen, Free Love and Heavenly Sinners (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 22.

disciples....[84] He believed that no doctrine "is good for anything that does not leave behind it an ethical furrow ready for the planting of seeds which shall spring up and bear abundant harvests."[85]

It was Beecher's conviction that "it was the beauty of Christian life that overcame philosophy, and won the way for Christian doctrine."[86] He pictured church leaders as gathered around the empty sepulcher of Christ wrangling "about the forms of religion, about creeds, and doctrines, and ordinances"[87] while Christ in heaven was saddened, disturbed and ashamed of their discords and conflicts. Thus, Beecher rejected the creeds of Christianity as both unproductive and divisive.

## The Inspiration of Scripture

Beecher's view of creeds leads naturally to a discussion of his position on the inspiration of the Scriptures. The orthodox position was that the Bible was fully inspired by God. Orthodoxy claimed that the Bible was infallible in every area in which it spoke whether that be history, science, medicine or theology. This prevailing

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[84]Batsell Barrett Baxter, The Heart of the Yale Lectures (New York, Macmillan Company, 1947), p. 20.

[85]Henry Ward Beecher, Life Thoughts (New York: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1858), p. 187.

[86]Baxter, p. 20.

[87]Beecher, Life Thoughts, p. 217.

orthodox position was rooted in the Protestant Reformation and was concisely articulated in the Westminister Confession of Faith. This Confession was the standard for Presbyterian and much of Protestant orthodoxy. It held that the scriptures alone were authoritative in matters of faith and doctrine. This view was usually termed the plenary-verbal theory of inspiration. Beecher held this position as a young clergyman. His theological evolution is reflected in his later attitudes toward revealed religion and the doctrine of inspiration. Beecher recognized that one's view of the inspiration of Scripture would influence all other theological positions. Beecher said, "When a man has given up this one fact of inspiration, he has given up the whole foundation of revealed religion."[88] While Beecher never abandoned the doctrine of inspiration, he did radically revise it to fit his brand of "evangelical liberalism." This practice of clinging to the terminology of orthodoxy while significantly revising the traditional meaning was a characteristic of Henry's preaching and teaching. This trait is also evident in Beecher's statements concerning the deity of Christ and the validity of miracles. The use of orthodox terminology was reassuring to Beecher's more conservative followers. These revised definitions heartened his liberal supporters. One of Beecher's most illuminating statements on the subject of the Bible was made in 1870. He

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[88]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 105.

said, "Religion did not begin in the Book. The Bible is, as it were, the geography of religion, the grammar of religion, the guidebook of religion and not the source of it, nor the authority for it."[89] The term "guidebook" best describes Beecher's concept of inspiration. He did not believe that it should be accepted literally. This view of inspiration permitted Beecher a great latitude in developing his own ideas concerning religion and man's relationship to God. It freed him from the restraints and constraints of orthodox interpretation. Beecher found in nature as much source for his faith as in the Bible. Even in Beecher's preaching there was only a casual relationship between his sermon and his text. A Bible text was only a sort of launching pad for Beecher's own remarks on the topic.

In the latter stages of Henry's career he became less ambiguous concerning his position and more bold in his departure from orthodoxy. He said at the age of fifty-seven, "the logical outcome of the theory of verbal and plenary inspiration is superstition...."[90] Beecher's view of the doctrine of inspiration is interrelated with his view of creedalism and directly impacts the balance of his religious views. This is especially true regarding Beecher's position concerning the nature of man.

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[89]Beecher, Fourth Series, p. 307.

[90]Handford, p. 193.

## The Nature of Man

In no area is Beecher's evolution more demonstrable than in his changing view of man. The ideological chasm between political conservatism and political liberalism is widest in their contrasting views on the nature of man. Beecher crossed this chasm. His changing views concerning man's potential paralleled his changing politics. There was a radical change that occurred in Beecher's thinking.

This change can be demonstrated by juxtaposing two of Beecher's statements, one at the dawn of his career and one at the sunset of his career. In 1843, at the age of thirty, in Indianapolis, he said, "knavish propensities are inherent; born with the child and transmissible from parent to son.... Only the most thorough moral training can overrule this innate depravity."[91] Late in his life he said in contrast, "We need not be afraid of getting rid of original sin..., you must either take away the fatherhood of God, or you must take away that horrible doctrine from theology."[92]

He believed that his father's view of original sin which he in the most orthodox of language espoused in 1843 would be exterminated with the light of evolution. He said, "The old theory of sin then, which will be exterminated, I think, by the new light thrown on the origin of man and the

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[91]Beecher, Lectures to Young Men, p. 54.

[92]Handford, p. 171.

conditions by which the race has been developed, is repulsive, unreasonable, immoral, and demoralizing. I hate it."[93] A more radical departure from the views of his youth can hardly be imagined. There is a vehemence to his language which underscores the importance of this change in Beecher's thinking. In spite of this, there remained vestiges of Beecher's Calvinistic background.

As Beecher's view of the nature of man evolved, he retained something of a belief in man's sinfulness. But to this he added a conviction that while man had a corrupt nature, he also had a divine nature. This belief in a divine nature was the source of his boundless optimism for the race. Beecher believed that the divine nature would through teaching and the exercise of man's volition overcome the corrupt nature.

This confidence was expressed in a message in 1869. He said, "all these restraints, therefore, in an intelligent and virtuous society, will be found to fall on the animal propensities, and to set free, by their limitation, the other part of human nature--its manhood, its divinity."[94] Clifford Clark recognizes this dualistic concept of man's nature so evident in Beecher's theology when he says:

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[93]Handford, p. 189.

[94]Beecher, Second Series, pp. 286, 287.

> Central to his guide to success was his attitude toward human nature. Like the New School theologians, Beecher argued that although all men have a tendency to sin, they also have the ability, if they wish, to save themselves.[95]

Beecher's belief in man's divinity was the basis of his optimism which would form the foundation of his political thought.

Beecher used vivid imagery to express his basically optimistic view of man. Even in his early sermons, this sense of optimism exists. In his Lectures to Young Men, he said, "I do believe that man is corrupt enough: but something of good has survived his wreck...."[96] He used the image of mistletoe springing from a dying branch. He spoke of the divine nature in man as a green sprout growing out of the cracks in the desolate temple of the human heart.[97] The stress in this imagery is clearly upon the corruption of the human heart with a little glimmer of hope.

In the fifty years of Beecher's public ministry his concept of the human nature changed greatly in its emphasis. In Indianapolis the emphasis was upon the sinfulness of man. In Brooklyn, the emphasis was upon the potential of man. Webber notes that in 1839, "he was a liberal Presbyterian..., he believed thoroughly in the corruption of

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[95]Clark, p. 69.

[96]Beecher, Lectures to Young Men, p. 116.

[97]Ibid., p. 117.

the unconverted man...."[98] Thirty-one years later Beecher spoke of the perversion of man's nature in his sermon, "The Moral Constitution of Man." In this sermon he attributed this perversion to merely "ignorance."[99] The contrast with the views he expressed on the American frontier in his youth is obvious. He no longer used the Calvinistic descriptions of utter sinfulness and innate depravity.

There was as he grew older much more than a glimmer of hope. Beecher's optimism rested on the potential of education and what he called "moral suasion." "This optimistic view of human nature, when carried over into the gospel of success, became the basis for Beecher's belief that anyone could become successful if only he worked at it."[100] Beecher, while never fully repudiating the sinfulness of man's nature, did reject Calvinism's stress on that sinfulness. He denied the concept of original sin and continually stressed man's potential and improveability. His belief in the improveability of man was buttressed by Darwinism which greatly influenced Beecher. Beecher in his lecture on "Evolution and Religion," said:

> Science does not destroy the doctrine of human sinfulness; it explains it, it defines it, it throws a cleaner light upon it. The old doctrine of sin, which it seems to me no man of moral feeling could allow

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[98]Webber, pp. 358, 359.

[99]Beecher, Fourth Series, p. 315.

[100]Clark, p. 59.

> himself to stand on for an hour or a moment, was that the human race born of their progenitors fell with them....[101]

Beecher retained the support of conservatives by saying that he did believe that man was born sinful. But he added that man is also born without the ability to walk or talk. He implied that just as these abilities are developed, so man's goodness and divinity is developed. Speaking of man's sinfulness he said, "I believe in their need. But I do not undertake, with my plummet, to sound their depths, and to say that men are totally depraved."[102] Beecher further believed that man is instinctively religious. "Religious yearning," he proclaimed, "is part and parcel of the human composition."[103] So, Beecher acknowledged man's sinfulness while minimizing it as mere human frailty. He stressed man's instinctive religious yearning and potential for improvement. This optimism concerning man and the emphasis upon his moral education became the very soul of Beecher's political views and influenced the development of political liberalism in the United States.

Henry's optimistic view of man was best expressed in his June 13, 1869 sermon at West Point. He called his

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[101]James B. Pond, A Summer in England with Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1887), p. 108.

[102]Henry Ward Beecher, Lectures on Preaching (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1902), p. 199.

[103]Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 30.

message, "The Perfect Manhood." He declared that "there is to be no such ascetic notion as shall attempt to throw out any part of man's nature as if he would be better without it than with it."[104] The traditional orthodox position was that man's nature was not only corrupt but that it should be "crucified" in a mystical sense. Beecher rejected this as an ascetic teaching. He insisted that it was the minister's job to expand, train, regulate, educate and control man's faculties. In this view we see the culmination of the evolution of Beecher's thinking regarding man. Beecher's teachings about man's nature is the foundation of Beecher's politics.

## Orthodoxy

At the age of twenty-three, Henry was as orthodox, it seemed, as any young Presbyterian preacher. "He readily studied his father's sermons and only rarely dissented from Lyman's opinions."[105] Even when he did differ, it was only on technical points never on central doctrines of orthodoxy. When he was ordained, he survived a two-day grilling and was declared by the examining council to be orthodox. Robert Hamilton Bishop commented at the time that "it is no inconsiderable matter in these days that Dr. Beecher [Lyman] has at least one son, who, after a full and free examination

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[104]Beecher, Second Series, p. 287.

[105]Caskey, p. 215.

before the Oxford Presbytery, has been pronounced to be orthodox and sound in the faith...."[106]

Though there is some evidence suggesting that Henry was not quite as orthodox as he tried to appear, he was far from the liberalism that would characterize his long ministry. He would later say, "Goodness is the only orthodoxy that God cares one particle about, and every man that is living the Christ-life is orthodox--doctrine go to the winds."[107] The previous statement notwithstanding, Beecher was adroit at "balancing himself upon the fence between liberalism and conservatism."[108]

This adroitness is obvious in his handling of the sensitive issue concerning the nature and necessity of miracles as an essential aspect of Christianity. "Beecher tried to outflank the issue in an essay published in 1859 entitled 'Natural Laws and Special Providences.' The substitution of 'providence' for 'miracles' was itself typical of his verbal dexterity."[109] Consistent with Beecher's belief in evolution was his concession "that religious faith was subject to the law of development as any other aspect of human life and society."[110] The secular

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[106]Caskey, p. 218.

[107]Handford, p. 69.

[108]McLoughlin, p. 42.

[109]Ibid.

[110]Ibid., p. 81.

press hailed Beecher's syncretistic views and endorsed Beecher's "ecumenical burgoo."[111]

Careful observers of Henry's ministry at Plymouth could scarcely miss the change that had occurred. There was no doubt that Beecher had moved far from the orthodox Protestant fold. He met his critics with his usual pointed humor. He asked, "What is orthodoxy? I will tell you. Orthodoxy is my doxy, and heterodoxy is your doxy, that is if your doxy is not like my doxy."[112]

Beecher stayed on the fence between liberalism and conservatism for several years but when he came down from the fence, he came down on the side of liberalism. He traveled a long road during his forty year ministry The road from orthodoxy had few stopping places upon it.

## Divine Retribution

Earlier it was observed that Beecher's view of Scripture was that it should not be pressed by a wooden literalness. This position affected many of Beecher's theological positions. This is especially evident in Henry's views regarding future punishment. Henry's father, Lyman, was typical of the orthodox doctrine. Lyman was a revivalist and a preacher of hell, fire and damnation. Caskey writes, "Unlike Lyman Beecher, who preached of

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[111]Caskey, p. 240.

[112]Shapen, p. 22.

eternal damnation, Henry veered away from such topics and eventually abandoned them altogether."[113]

Henry believed in a form of eternal punishment but not in a literal fire and brimstone hell. He would have liked to have abandoned the doctrine completely because of its offensiveness to his own moral sensibilities. It was his high regard for the testimony of Jesus that restrained him from a total rejection of the doctrine. He said in a sermon in 1871 that "there is the plain, simple testimony of Jesus Christ. I cannot get around that, nor get over it. There it is...as long as I hold to the divinity of Christ I cannot but hold the truth he taught...that sin will be visited in the other life with terrible penalties."[114] He here bases his belief in eternal retribution on the testimony of a divine Jesus.

Many would argue that within fifteen years of that 1871 statement expressing his belief in the doctrine of eternal retribution on the testimony of Jesus, Beecher would reject the "divinity" or deity of Jesus Christ. Thus, Beecher's only remaining reason for believing in eternal punishment would be gone. Beecher without doubt diminished the importance of the teaching and revised the traditional understanding of it. He said, "Fire and brimstone...are simply the pigments which are employed to render a

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[113]Caskey, p. 227.

[114]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 109.

picture.... These figures are not, then designed to be taken as literal facts."[115]

Several factors shaped Henry's position on this subject. Such a teaching was against his own nature. Further it reflected his spiritual (in contrast with literal) approach to the Scriptures. It is unlikely that preaching on hell would have been accepted in Plymouth Church and it was unlike Beecher to preach unpopular doctrines. Altina Waller and others who take a psycho-biographical approach argue that Beecher's rejection of the traditional concept of hell reflected his rejection of everything in his father's theology and a further reaction reaction to his stern, puritanical upbringing.[116] This view will be discussed later.

## Christology

Beecher's perception of Christ, the key to his theology, underwent great changes. He was (as with many doctrines) both eloquent and equivocal in his preaching about Christ. Webber says, "He never denied the deity of the savior" while acknowledging that his idea of "a son of God, limited by time and space, and of questionable omniscience, caused concern among his fellow

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[115]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 109.

[116]Waller, p. 21.

clergymen...."[117] Indeed, Beecher eventually pulled Plymouth Church out of the Congregational denomination. He did so, he said, to avoid embarrassing his church with his views. The Congregationalists were known for their tolerance of a great latitude of theological views within their denomination. Their alarm at some of Beecher's views is convincing evidence of the significant changes that had occurred in his beliefs about the person of Christ.

"By 1875...he was telling his people that 'Christ is in Himself the atonement,' a declaration Edward Beecher thought both inaccurate and irresponsible."[118] Edward was often exasperated by Henry's lack of logic and consistency. But the brothers were of the same mind in the view "that God so loves his creatures that...he has suffered and still suffers for their redemption and moral renovation."[119] This theory was rejected by virtually all orthodox clergy.

This eccentricity only enhanced the importance of Christ to his theology. He exulted, "When Christ appears I rush to him, as suited to my greater need. I do not trouble myself to prove his Divinity--equality with God, in a strict theological sense--He is mine--His limitation is my

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[117]Webber, p. 361.

[118]Caskey, p. 361.

[119]Robert Meredith, The Politics of the Universe (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), p. 183.

richness."[120] A measure of the importance of Christ in Beecher's theology is reflected in his sermon texts during what was a typical two-year period in his ministry, March 1869 - March 1871. Of one hundred sermon texts during this period more than one third were from the gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The sermon titles also demonstrate Beecher's proclivity for Christocentric preaching. Typical sermon titles during this same two-year period include: "The Sympathy of Christ," "The Graciousness of Christ," "The Preciousness of Christ," "The Sufficiency of Jesus," "Christ the Deliverer," and "The Growth of Christ in Us." Beecher dismissed the dogmatists airily. "Men want to know whether Christ is divine," he said, "and they test him as a chemist would test the quality of a substance...and so they weigh the divinity of Christ as though it were a ponderable element."[121] Thus, while Christ, his life, his ministry, his suffering occupied a place of great importance in Beecher's thinking, he was ambiguous at best concerning the deity of Christ.

## Calvinism

Robert G. Ingersoll eloquently describes Beecher's view of Calvinism as a prison cell from which he had managed to escape. Ingersoll said:

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[120]Caskey, p. 241.

[121]Beecher, Sixth Series, p. 61.

> Through the grated windows of his cell, this child, this boy, this man caught glimpses of the outer world, of fields and skies. New thoughts were in his brain, new hopes within his heart, another heaven above his life. There came a revelation of the beautiful and real. Theology grew mean and small. Nature wooed, and won, and saved this mighty soul.[122]

Ingersoll with equal force denounced Lyman Beecher as the cruel prison warden who wounded and scarred the souls of his children.

Henry himself viewed Calvinism as a malady that he survived. In his usual humorous way he quipped in 1866 in London, "I went through all the colic and anguish of hyper-calvinism while I was quite young. Happily my constitution was strong...."[123] Henry F. May believes that from childhood "Beecher's exuberant nature had strained against the inherited Calvinist bonds."[124] He eschewed the flint-like faith of the Puritans and gradually rejected each of the essential tenets of Calvinism. Total depravity, absolute predestination, salvation of only the elect and with it the doctrine of limited atonement all fell by the wayside as Beecher developed his emotional, experience-oriented theology.

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[122]Caskey, p. 208.

[123]The Life of Henry Ward Beecher, Selections from His Sermons, Writings, Speeches and Letters (New York: Hurst and Company), p. 108.

[124]May, p. 68.

## The Primacy of Love

Waller concluded that though "his theology was vague, his moral standards flexible, and his reform efforts sporadic, the pursuit of love and power was always evident."[125] Beecher was consistent in few areas. But an emphasis upon God's love for man and in turn man's love for God and his fellowman was one area in which Beecher was consistent--and persistent.

With sermon titles such as: "The Primacy of Love," "The Power of Love," "Love, the Common Law of the Universe," "The Faith of Love," "Love-Service," and "The Harmony of Justice and Love," it is little wonder that Beecher's philosophy became known as the Gospel of Love. These sermons and many others like them rejected the world of his youth as oppressive, narrow, rigid and barren. Paxton Hibben in his 1927 biography of Beecher comments that in "his last sermons, Henry Ward Beecher seemed to forget evolution. He could talk only of love, as the very old hark back to the memories of childhood...."[126]

No single word, apart from the word "God," is used more in Beecher's sermon titles than the word "Love." In Beecher's Life Thoughts, he says, "now abideth Faith, Hope, Love, these three; but the greatest of these is Love, for love is the seraph, and faith and hope are but the wings by

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[125]Waller, p. 19.

[126]Hibben, p. 351.

which it flies."[127]

Beecher's emphasis upon love was unmistakable to even the casual visitor to Plymouth Church. Love permeated Beecher's thinking. Love affected Beecher's political thought also. His optimistic view of man's future was based in part on his attitudes on God's love for mankind. In an 1871 sermon entitled "Love-Service," Beecher reflected his high estimate of the love of God. He said, "If the world is struggling upward toward a higher development of true manhood, God, the Almighty, stands by, helping man's throes toward universal elevation by that love which thinks, which cares, which hears, which suffers."[128]

As an old man addressing the Yale Divinity students Beecher charged the young men with the importance of love in their ministries. He called his lecture, "Love, the Central Element of the Ministry." He said in concluding this lecture, "Stand fearless, speaking the truth in love, and in a good deal of love,--in love multiplied just in proportion as the theme is critical and dangerous."[129] There is no doubt that love occupied a place of primacy in the ministry and political thought of Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher's optimism about God's love for mankind led easily to an

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[127]Beecher, Life Thoughts, p. 299.

[128]Beecher, Sixth Series, p. 61.

optimism about man's potential. Beecher's emphasis upon love buttressed his political liberalism.

## The Social Gospel

One of the lasting impacts of Beecher's life was in the development of the "Social Gospel." When Beecher preached his "Sermon on Christian Character" published in 1869 he laid the cornerstone for what became known as the social gospel. His statement that "all details of human life" were to be influenced by Christianity caused people to begin to think "of the kingdom of God as having to do with this world as well as the next."[130]

The term "Social Gospel" was not used until after Henry's death. It came into prominent use through the name of a magazine which first appeared in 1898. The magazine was called The Social Gospel, A Magazine of Obedience to the Law of Love.[131] It was Beecher though who paved the way for the social gospel movement with such comments as "I am bound to preach the truth so that every man shall see the right better, and so that the whole of society shall live on a higher plane."[132] It was Beecher as an ecclesiastical

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[129]Beecher, Lectures, p. 257.

[130]Anson Phelps Stokes, Church and State in the United States, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 258.

[131]Ibid., p. 104.

[132]Beecher, Third Series, pp. 30-31.

leader and as a clergyman addressing such issues as abolition, women's rights, civil liberties and war that became the incipient social gospel.

Beecher's convictions concerning the social implications of the gospel, like other aspects of his religious philosophy changed markedly through the years. Henry had not always been so enamored with social action. In the early years in Lawrenceburg and Indianapolis, Henry was a revivalist in the mold of his father. He emphasized the necessity of a personal conversion experience. The only social issues that concerned Beecher in these early years were temperance, gambling and the frontier vices. Beecher at this early point in his ministry believed in the efficacy of "moral suasion." This concept of moral suasion involved education and moral training. He spurned the idea that morality could be legislated. As the social applications of the gospel became more prominent in his preaching, his ideas of the government's role changed correspondingly. Later in New York, Beecher favored temperance laws. He became increasingly involved in the political arena.

The growing involvement in partisan politics testified to Beecher's shift in attitude toward the role of government. He took public positions on such issues as suffrage for women, labor unions and immigration. In American Christianity, An Historical Interpretation, it is correctly noted that "the social gospel was not a revolutionary attack on capitalistic society from the

outside, but a reforming effort from within."[133] Beecher was one of the early leaders in this reform effort. He established an early and clear precedent for the clergy's involvement in socio-economic issues and consistently related these issues to his religious faith.

Beecher's father, Lyman, and other revivalists of the earlier generation had conceived of conversion as an instantaneous experience of divine grace. Henry now expressed conversion as the gradual development of character. "By redefining the nature of the conversion experience...Beecher watered down the principle of disinterested benevolence that the earlier generation of revivalists had used to argue that a true conversion would be followed by socially beneficent action."[134] Since the early social gospel advocates saw their role as reformers within capitalist society, it is not surprising that their "ideal of the kingdom of God has striking resemblance to bourgeois America of its day."[135]

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[133]Robert T. Handy, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Shelton Smith, American Christianity, An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 362.

[134]Clark, p. 134.

[135]Handy, Loetscher and Shelton, American Christianity, p. 362.

# CHAPTER VI

## BEECHER'S POLITICAL THEORY

Beecher's political theory is inextricably linked to his religious faith. His political views were shaped by religious beliefs and paralleled those beliefs at every point in his life. In this chapter Beecher's views concerning liberty, clerical involvement in partisan politics, classes, women's rights, the inevitability of human progress, social stability and church-state relations will be examined.

### Liberty

Freedom and liberty are given a prominent place in Beecher's preaching and in his writing. He argued that liberty does not and cannot exist in the absolute. He said in his sermon, "Moral Theory of Civil Liberty," that "self-government is a better term than liberty. We are in the habit of speaking of certain nations as free people. It would be better to speak of them as self-governing people. There is no such thing as absolute liberty."[136]

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[136]Beecher, Second Series, p. 285.

Beecher spoke of physical laws, society's laws and civil laws as that which bind people. Beecher defined liberty as "the soul's right to breathe."[137] He declared "there is a certain liberty which a man can exercise but the extent of that liberty is very small."[138] He believed that freedom is expanded in proportion to the morality and education in a society. He proclaimed that "there can be no such thing as civil freedom outside the sphere of religion. Oppression goes with the lower nature, and belongs to it, and will break out of it perpetually."[139] Thus, to Beecher, strong religious institutions were essential to a free people. He continued, "You cannot make a people free that are ignorant and animal; and on the other hand, you cannot forever keep any people in bondage that are thoroughly educated and thoroughly moral."[140] He was convinced that the South American republics would continue to boil with revolutions "till education and true religion make more of manhood and diminish...the animalism that belongs to the people."[141] Beecher was convinced that totalitarianism was the inevitable government of ignorant people.

Beecher exalted the individual but was certain that

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[137]Handford, p. 128.

[138]Beecher, Second Series, p. 286.

[139]Ibid., p. 290.

[140]Ibid.

[141]Ibid.

institutions were required for man to develop himself to the fullest extent. He stated that "man is the elementary power and the supreme value, but for his own greatest good he requires institutions; they are the means by which man acts, and without which he never could develop himself or make use of his power were it developed."[142]

Beecher said there were two great civic truths. The first he declared is the liberty of the individual, the second he said is the necessity of the civil state, of laws and beneficent institutions. Beecher believed that liberty is the soul's right to breathe. He added that when it cannot take a long breath, laws are girdled too tight. He said, "Without liberty man is in a syncope."[143] From these and other statements, it is clear that while Beecher viewed government as necessary for the full exercise of liberty, he also viewed it as a threat to liberty.

Henry also saw the excesses of the industrial revolution as a real threat to the liberty of the individual. Clifford Clark observed that "Beecher believed that the haphazard growth of business and industry was depriving people of their rights and freedoms."[144] Beecher warned in 1857 that "the world's strength lies in the millions of hands of

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[142]Permanent Documents of the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education in the West, quoted in Clark, pp. 105, 106.

[143]Handford, p. 128.

[144]Clark, p. 106.

producers and exchangers. Power has shifted. No matter who reigns--the merchant reigns.... The kings are weaker than the bankers. War cannot convulse the world--but capital can."[145]

In spite of this warning, Beecher was a firm believer in the work ethic, the capitalist system and the glowing future of free enterprise. He was reluctant to support the labor movement. He counseled patience to the working class. In the 1870s he became aligned with some of those stifling forces of business and industry of which he had warned his flock fifteen years before. There were many business and industrial forces represented in Plymouth Church. Beecher himself was a conspicuous consumer.

Beecher was a proponent of laissez-faire. "Beecher accepted the dominant economic theory with his usual gusto."[146] Beecher recognized corporate America as a dangerous threat to liberty as evidenced by his declaration that the kings were weaker than the bankers. But he was reluctant to advocate government restraint. He sincerely believed that corporations could be a source of benevolent charity and thus a rich blessing to society. With typical ambiguity Beecher said,

> Organized wealth is one great danger which lies ahead, looming up gigantically. And yet, wealth must be organized. The community will have to find ways to

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[145]Hibben, p. 168.

[146]May, p. 69.

> protect itself. If wealth be organized to do as it pleases, it becomes very dangerous. Nevertheless, organized wealth is yet to be a benefactor of the community.... Great corporations are dangerous. They do not need to be.[147]

This statement well expresses Beecher's equivocating position in regard to corporate power. There were bloody strikes in 1877. But the churches "were deterred from giving moral leadership in the industrial crisis by laissez-faire economics, which they inclined to accept almost as theological orthodoxy."[148] This was true of Beecher as well.

In short, Beecher taught that there were several essential ingredients in the maintenance of liberty. It can be deduced from Beecher's numerous statements on the subject that he believed there must be: (1) strong morals, (2) a disciplined people, (3) a quality educational system, (4) a limited government, and (5) a benevolent corporate structure. Beecher theorized that each of these was built upon and dependent upon those preceding them.

To Beecher morality was the fabric of society. The preacher was the single most important person in the defense of liberty. The preacher was the guardian of morals and the inculcator of discipline. He was often the most educated individual in the community. For these reasons Beecher emphasized his role in maintaining liberty.

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[147]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 212.

[148]Handy, Loetscher, and Smith, p. 359.

Beecher said, "True preachers are always revolutionary men. To preach a larger manhood is to unsettle by prophecy, all thrones." He continued, "The best way to make better men is to make better citizens."[149] This is the job of the preacher. But after the preacher had fulfilled his responsibility, liberty was then dependent upon the individual. He argued that the degree of liberty "attainable by an individual depends upon the restraint which he puts upon the lower nature."[150] He further stressed the imperative of a quality and universal educational system. He accordingly supported the educational endeavors of his sister Catherine. She was the oldest of the Beecher children and was a great promoter of education for women. She established two girls' seminaries and founded the American Woman's Educational Association to help supply women teachers for midwestern schools. Catherine's passion for education without doubt influenced Henry's attitude toward the importance of educational opportunity.

In a lecture on "Puritanism," Beecher praised the Puritan as a "man thoroughly alive to liberty."[151] In Beecher's esteem for the Puritan we glimpse his own feelings

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[149]Beecher, Second Series, p. 292.

[150]Beecher, Second Series, p. 287.

[151][151]Henry Ward Beecher, Lecture and Orations, ed. Newell Dwight Hillis (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1913), p. 29.

on the topic of liberty. He said, "the first grand battle of the Puritan was continental, and in behalf of the right of every man to his own God."[152] Chief among the rights of mankind is religious liberty, Beecher affirmed.

Beecher emphasized that "God is father, man is child. Religion is liberty. No man but the father shall tell the child what he may do at home."[153] He felt very strongly that religious liberty could not exist without a clear separation of church and state. Later in the same lecture Beecher said that "It was not until they had got out entirely from the shadow of the cathedral that they could make straight lines in religion, and only when they left beyond the seas the whole fabric of monarchy that they gave consistency and symetry to their civil governments."[154] Beecher believed that the Puritan ideal of liberty blossomed in the new world. On the continent, "the premises had been government--from which they strove to recover the rights of the people. In the wilderness of New England, the syllogism was reversed and the premise was the people--and the inference a government."[155]

None can question Beecher's deep and abiding commitment

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[152]Beecher, Lecture and Orations, p. 26.

[153]Ibid., pp. 28, 29.

[154]Ibid.

[155]Ibid.

to liberty. He once said, "the things required for prosperous commerce are three. First, liberty, second liberty; and third, liberty."[156] This was not merely a laissez-faire cliche to Beecher; it was heart-felt conviction. He was convinced that "true manhood and Christian liberty were identical."[157]

## The Role of Government

Beecher's views on the role of government were typical of the Victorian era. He reflected Jeffersonian liberalism in his attitude toward government and believed government to be an enemy of liberty. He thought that government represented the greatest threat to individual freedom. He therefore advocated a very circumscribed role for the state.

In an 1881 sermon entitled "Individual Responsibility," Beecher said that "a government that thinks for its people, or that undertakes to think for them, dwarfs them at once. Such a government is called a paternal government, and is the fool's idea of a government. It is a government of fatuity."[158]

Beecher's background in and belief in congregational church polity influenced his views on democracy, individualism and the size of government. Congregationalism

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[156]May, p. 69.

[157]Beecher, Lectures and Orations, p. 29.

[158]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 255.

as opposed to episcopacy emphasized local autonomy. It taught that each congregation was to be left free to select its own pastor, determine its policies and manage its own affairs. There was further emphasis upon the individual believer's priesthood and his right to vote and express his voice in the affairs of the church.

Beecher believed that the strength of the republican form of government was in "that it has educated a race of men that are men...."[159] Beecher felt that a representative democracy encouraged individualism and self-reliance.

One of the major issues concerning the role of government and its effect on individual liberties was the issue of Black voting rights. Clifford Clark observes that "Beecher was...opposed to having the federal government defend Black rights at the ballot box by taking over Southern elections. That action would violate the dominant Northern ideology of laissez-faire, to which he also subscribed."[160] This is not to minimize Beecher's commitment to Negro voting rights. Caught in a dilemma between his support of universal suffrage and his fear of government control, he relied on the naive hope "that a display of goodwill on both sides would provide the Negro with access to the ballot box."[161]

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[159]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 255.

[160]Clark, p. 171.

[161]Ibid.

Beecher reflected the optimistic and self-reliant outlook of his generation. This perspective influenced his concerns regarding paternalistic government. Though he had rejected many of his father's views, he retained a strong belief in what has come to be called the "Protestant work ethic." Beecher's attitude is concisely expressed in his statement that "American institutions teach that everything should be attained through individual exertion with the help of government."[162] So, he saw government as a helper. How much should the government assist the individual? In only very limited ways. His view of a helping government was far from a welfare state. In fact, he called socialism "a skin disease," and added that it was "nothing but anarchy disguised."[163]

Beecher rarely spoke in temperate tones. This was true regarding his comments on government. He said there are "people who ask the government to supply them with everything. They want their clothes made and their bread baked by government. Give the government these privileges and you give it all power."[164] Beecher often spoke in almost Jeffersonian language.

The preceding statement accurately reflected Beecher's prevailing philosophy. However, there is some evidence that

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[162]Handford, p. 114.

[163]Ibid.

[164]Ibid.

his thinking concerning the role of the state changed over the years. He was a contemporary of the great British theorist T. H. Green. Beecher was not a great reader and it is doubtful that Green had any direct influence on him. He was though always familiar with the world of ideas and surely must have been influenced by him indirectly.

Green's political theory of positive freedom emphasized the use of state institutions to remove obstacles hindering the exercise of personal liberties. While this concept was foreign to all that Beecher had been taught throughout his life, it seemed to have made an impression on him. Clark relates that "Beecher made a plea for the creation of protective institutions." Clark added that Beecher "feared that the self-reliant individual of the Jacksonian era was becoming lost in the increasingly complex and interdependent society of the 1850's."[165]

One wonders how Beecher would react to the complexity of our contemporary society. Even in Beecher's sermon on "Individual Responsibility," he admits "that there is to be an economy in every wise society, to take care of the feeble-minded."[166] There are hints in this statement that Henry gradually became less averse to governmental intervention. There are undertones of positive freedom in Beecher's statement that man "requires institutions: they

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[165]Clark, p. 106.

[166]Beecher,

are the means by which he acts, and without which he never could develop himself...."[167] One would assume that the state is included in Beecher's reference to "institutions." If so, then Beecher saw government as a positive force in an individual's self-development.

In Beecher's lecture, "The Wastes and Burdens of Society," he said, "it is the duty of every governing body...to look after the health of the citizens, in draining, in lighting, in cleansing the streets, and in securing them from epidemics...."[168] In the same lecture he lists health, crime, and education as legitimate concerns of government. It is mild by today's standards but was rather progressive for 1860.

## Clerical Political Involvement

Beecher always reacted strongly when criticized for his political activities. In 1869, he responded:

> When, therefore, it is said, these churches and ministers have no right to meddle with political questions, it is saying substantially this: that ministers may preach truths as long as they preach them so that they do not hit anywhere: as long as they preach them abstractly; but that when they...began to be practical, then they must stop, because they have no right to preach politics.[169]

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[167] Permanent Documents, quoted in Clark, pp. 105, 106.

[168] Beecher, Lectures and Orations, pp. 51, 52.

[169] Beecher, Third Series, p. 24.

Certainly, Beecher was never accused of just preaching abstractly. He was persuaded that people wanted preaching on topics of interest in the secular world. The crowds bore witness that he was right. Some accused him of being a politician who had mistakenly found his way into the pulpit. He preached women's suffrage, temperance, abolitionism--politics. The whole issue is as contemporary as the Moral Majority or the Catholic Bishop's Conference.

Henry waxed eloquent in his defense of clerical political involvement. He rhetorically asked:

> Did I, when I became a minister, cease to be a man or a citizen? No! A thousand times no! Have I now as much interest in our government as thought I were a lawyer, a ditch digger or a wood sawyer? Out upon this idea that a minister must dress minister, walk minister, talk minister, eat minister and wear his ministerial badge as a convict wears his stripes.[170]

The logic of Beecher's defense is as profound today as it was more than a century ago. His words still clearly convey the intensity of his emotion and conviction on this issue.

Beecher spoke often on political subjects. He was actively involved in partisan politics. He endorsed candidates and vigorously campaigned for them. For these activities he was profusely criticized. During the Civil War when Beecher was closely identified with the abolitionist movement, he said, "It is the duty of the

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[170]Shaplen, p. 22.

minister of the gospel to preach on every side of political life. I do not say that he may, I say that he must."[171]

Henry's political involvement was related to his revolutionary views on the social implications of the gospel. Lyman Abbot, Beecher's successor at Plymouth Church, said of Beecher, "He was a political reformer only because he believed that the gospel was social as well as individual: that the object of Christ was the reconstruction of society."[172] Henry F. May observes that "...Beecher in wartime became something that America had not seen in generations: a church political leader."[173] Beecher believed that "at one time or another, almost every question that belongs to religion, becomes a political question."[174]

When Beecher began his pastoral career he accepted the traditional role of the minister. He espoused his moral suasion theory. The concept stressed the preacher as the persuader of his people on important moral issues. It did not involve political action on the part of pastor or people. There was no requirement for legislative work or political involvement. He agreed with the prevailing view of his day that morality could not be coerced by legislation.

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[171]May, 40.

[172]Tewksbury, p. 11.

[173]May, p. 40.

[174]Beecher, Third Series, p. 24.

While Beecher never totally abandoned the concept of "moral suasion," he did modify his position greatly. Clark observes an important turning point in Beecher's career in 1855. He notes that after 1855, "while Beecher still argued for moral suasion, he now urged it be supplemented with political involvement."[175] Clark observes this change first in the anti-slavery movement and then in the temperance crusade. In the temperance crusade Beecher altered his position from fighting alcoholism through voluntary societies to a stand favoring legislation.[176]

Beecher lectured his fellow citizens on a wide variety of subjects. He spoke on corruption, currency, emancipation, free trade, immigration, pacifism, reconstruction, women's rights and almost every other public question of his time. Beecher said that "as we profess to be Christians, we have a right to bring all public questions to the arbitrament of revealed truth."[177]

Late in his life, in a sermon on the development of civil Liberty in the U.S. Beecher amplified on this idea. He said, "The moment a man so conducts his profession that it touches the question of right and wrong, he comes into my sphere. There I stand: and I put God's measure, the golden reed of the sanctuary on him and his course...and I am not

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[175]Clark, p. 127.

[176]Ibid., p. 126.

[177]Beecher, Third Series, p. 24.

meddling."[178] Beecher's idea of the sphere of right and wrong encompassed almost all public issues. He acknowledged that a preacher could preach politics too much. He said, "a minister may be discreet in preaching upon secular topics but," he added, "that is no reason why they should not be preached upon."[179]

So, Beecher's evolution is evident in his shifting views regarding the preacher and politics. Beecher moved from the leading advocate of moral suasion to being the leading advocate of political activism. He at one time reflected the traditional clerical reticence to express political views from the pulpit. But by the time he was pastoring Plymouth Church in Brooklyn he had become a leading social critic and a political leader.

## Classes in American Society

Beecher's view of democracy encompassed equal opportunity for all members of society. He reflected the opinion of nineteenth century America in opposing the involvement of government in efforts to redistribute wealth. McLoughlin is correct in asserting that Beecher believed that "...Jacksonian egalitarianism was harmful, dangerous and wrong because it ran counter to the fundamental law of development, which postulated an upward-spiraling state of

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[178]Beecher, Patriotic Addresses, p. 80.

[179]Ibid.

society, not a flat homogeneous, undifferentiated plane."[180] Beecher believed that while "organized society will always be graded,"[181] the gradations are not static but always spiraling upward. By this he meant that the lower classes (educationally and economically) were always upwardly mobile. Beecher's optimistic outlook taught that "there might be innate intellectual and moral graduations in society, but he saw no fixed class barriers."[182] Beecher minimized the potential of class antagonism, convinced as he was that the elevation of the laboring class would occur with sufficient speed to prevent class warfare.

It was Beecher's conviction that equality could not be compelled. He said, "no government has a right to thrust a strong man down to the level of weakness. No institution has a right to force a weak man up to the level of the strong."[183] Not only did Beecher insist that government should not try to break down class gradations, he contended that any such attempt would be futile. He declared, "Classes are going to exist, and there is going to be top, bottom, and middle, and labor organization cannot break that down."[184] Although McLoughlin insists that "Henry Ward

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[180]McLoughlin, p. 137.

[181]Beecher, Third Series, p. 137.

[182]McLoughlin, p. 150.

[183]Beecher, Third Series, p. 170.

[184]Handford, p. 122.

Beecher would have been morally outraged had he thought anyone would ever accuse him of being elitist,"[185] many of Beecher's statements leave that very impression.

Darwin's doctrine of the survival of the fittest left an unmistakable mark on Beecher's thinking. The following Beecher simile conveys his perception of society:

> It was designed that some should be high, some intermediate, and some low, as trees are some forty, some a hundred, and some giant pines three hundred feet in height. But however high their tops may reach, their roots rest in the same soil; as men though they can grow and tower aloft as much as they please, still stand on a common level.[186]

This common level to Beecher was all mankind's common humanity and opportunity.

Beecher attributed poverty in society to a lack of education and a lack of industry. The remedy, he believed, was in (1) an improved education and in (2) better moral training. He implies the need for education when in a sermon called "Tendencies of American Progress" he said, "and in every community there must be these classes. The lowest and most ignorant, who have never gone to school...."[187] The clear implication is that if they had gone to school, they would not be ignorant or members of the lowest classes. He was, though, characteristically

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[185]McLoughlin, p. 152.

[186]Handford, p. 126.

[187]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 210.

optimistic that private sources of wealth would benevolently aid in the education of the masses. He said in the same sermon, "Wealth is searching out the neglected classes...., is opening schools for the laboring classes."[188]

In spite of his optimism for what universal education could accomplish, he continued to insist that the primary cause of poverty was individual not societal. In this view, Beecher was far different from his successors in the social gospel who would blame society and the environment for social ills like poverty. Beecher said, "there may be reasons of poverty which do not involve wrong, but looking comprehensively through city and town and village and country, the general truth will stand, that no man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault--unless it be his sin."[189] In this view, Beecher reflects the prevailing attitude of his day.

Beecher himself was often criticized for his own material indulgences. He enjoyed a handsome salary, lived in a comfortable residence, and possessed the peculiar habit of carrying unset diamonds in his pocket. When nervous, Beecher liked to toy with these diamonds in his hands. Clifford Clark asserts that "there was a glaring contradiction between the two sides of Beecher's social philosophy--his defense of frugality, discipline, and

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[188]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 210.

[189]May, p. 69.

character, and his rationalization of leisure, wealth and luxury."[190]

Beecher himself was a conspicuous consumer while warning against the dangers of extravagance. He said, "It is the general tendency of human nature to degenerate in the midst of great and long-continued prosperity."[191] Yet, no one ever enjoyed physical prosperity more. He was a bundle of contradictions. This notwithstanding, May is correct in saying "the great preacher's warm heart was filled with sympathy for the poor."[192]

Henry Ward Beecher sensed the growing problem of class conflict. While confident of a congenial resolution, he did seek to sound a warning to the upper class. In a lecture entitled "The Wastes and Burdens of Society," he said, "You cannot have a foul cellar and not have a dangerous upstairs." He continued,

> In society the upper classes have a great deal more risk than they are apt to suppose: though they keep themselves in a sanitive condition, yet there is this reeking influence that is coming up directly or indirectly everywhere.[193]

Beecher was undoubtedly sincere in his warning to the upper classes and in his concern for the poor. However, his own

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[190]Clark, p. 214.

[191]Beecher, Third Series, p. 165.

[192]May, p. 69.

[193]Hillis, pp. 54, 55.

lifestyle tended to undermine the potency of his warnings.

## Women's Rights

Beecher was an early and outspoken exponent of women's rights. Suffrage was one of the crucial issues during the last half of the nineteenth century. It was therefore natural for Beecher to address the subject. He first announced his support for suffrage in 1854. In 1860 he spoke on women's influence in politics. This address was transcribed and widely distributed as a suffrage tract. He was one of the organizers of the Equal Rights Association in 1865. As always Beecher proceeded cautiously.

Initially, Beecher's argument was "not so much that women have a right to the vote as that they will bring to bear a superior refinement and loftier morality."[194] The women's rights movement split in the late 1860s. The more radical group was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. This group formed the Naticnal Woman Suffrage Association. The second group, called the American Woman Suffrage Association, was more moderate and was led by Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone. Henry supported the latter group and served as the titual head of the organization for a period of time.

Beecher always romanticized and idealized women. He said, "You that live long enough will see women vote, and

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[194]Rugoff, p. 387.

when you see women voting, you will see less lying, less brutality and more public spirit, heroism and romance in public affairs."[195] Considering this romantic and moralistic view of women, it is ironic that it was a suffrage leader, Victoria Woodhull, bitter over Beecher's rejection of the radicals, who exposed what she believed were Beecher's extramarital sexual activities. Beecher's support of suffrage was based more on utility than on a belief in equal rights. In spite of this and in spite of the caution with which he spoke, Beecher was throughout his Brooklyn ministry a staunch proponent of suffrage.

## Beecher's Optimism and the Progress of the Human Race

If one word alone were used to describe Beecher's outlook on society, that word would surely be optimism. Beecher "belongs to that long train of American positive thinkers extending from Benjamin Franklin to Mary Baker Eddy and Norman Vincent Peale."[196] About 1850 Beecher began to lose confidence in the pessimistic doctrines of Calvinism. His sermons and lectures started overflowing with hope and optimism. He stressed progress and improvement. He insisted that society was marching toward the millennium. He said that "Christianization, education, and peer-group

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[195]Handford, p. 225.

[196]McLoughlin, p. 47.

pressure were the great instruments of social advancement but real progress was never achieved overnight."[197]

He considered that while social advancement would be slow, it would also be sure. He said, "In my earliest preaching I discerned that the kingdom of heaven is a leaven, not only in the individual soul, but in the world...."[198] Beecher's analogy of the kingdom to leaven is an allusion to the Scriptural parable in Matthew 13:33. The reference is to the expanding and pervasive influence of leaven and is suggestive of Beecher's social philosophy. Expressing his unbounded optimism for the advancement of the human race, he said:

> There was never so much sympathy; there never was so much philanthropy; there never was so much active benevolence, self-denial and consecration of wealth as there is today. All these things...are lifting the standard of human existence higher and higher, and rendering men capable of nobler thoughts, more perfect sanctification and more glorious achievements.[199]

This is typical of Beecher's firm confidence in the perpetual elevation of civilization.

Beecher was what is called in theological terms a post-millennialist. He believed that world conditions would steadily improve, that the world would eventually be Christianized, that education would be universal and the lot

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[197]Clark, p. 168.

[198]Handford, p. 183.

[199]Ibid., p. 141.

of the masses elevated. He believed that the world would be taken for Christ and then Christ would return to reign.

Beecher said, "I believe that the spirit of religion itself is growing."[200] Another time he exulted that "among plain people of the country, I think there is more reading, and more thinking, and more real heart-interest in religion than ever before."[201] There is some merit in the criticism that Beecher viewed the world through rose colored glasses. He minimized the growing labor ferment in the United States. In a Thanksgiving Day message he beamed that, "throughout the length and breadth of this great land labor whistles, and sings, and is happy."[202] Even allowing for some ministerial hyperbole, the statement was insensitive to the truly deplorable working conditions in industrial America.

The clear influence of social darwinism can be seen in a statement Beecher made in his sermon on the "Tendencies of American Progress." He said, "The mass of our working population, I think, were never so well clothed, so bountifully fed and so well housed, as they are now; and the tendency is not backward, but forward."[203] Forward, upward, better, improvement--these are the prominent words of Beecher's vocabulary. At another time Beecher declared that

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[200]Beecher, Second Series, p. 299.

[201]Beecher, Fifth Series, p. 217.

[202]Ibid., p. 205.

[203]Ibid.

"in regard to ourselves, my own augury for the future is a pleasing one."[204]

Beecher's optimism for society was carried over to his personal philosophy of life. He counseled, "Don't mope. Be young as long as you live. Laugh a good deal. Frolic every day. A low tone of mind is unhealthy."[205] Beecher put his advice into practice and it was a tonic to his own health. To the end of his life this optimistic and positive outlook marked his public statements. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, June 25, 1883, he said, "When I look down, therefore, into the future, my hope and my confidence is that religion is leading men on. My trust and my unshaken hope for the future is that God reigns and the whole earth shall see His salvation."[206]

In his sermons, Beecher usually preached on very positive themes. They reflected the optimism of his whole approach to life. His sermon titles are characterized by a positive approach. He preached "Self-Control Possible to All," "The Victory of Hope in Sorrow," "The Victorious Power of Faith," "The Era of Joy," and "The Power of Humble Fidelity." Beecher was forever speaking of "power,"

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[204]Beecher, Second Series, p. 299.

[205]Handford, p. 223.

[206]The Life of Henry Ward Beecher, Selections from His Sermons, Writings, Speeches and Letters (New York: Hurst and Company), p. 59.

"victory," "possiblity," and "joy." Indeed, it was an era of joy that he envisioned for America.

## Social Conservatism

While Beecher is identified with theological liberalism, socially and even politically he was often quite moderate and sometimes conservative. Clark argues that "At heart, Beecher remained a typical New England conservative, dedicated to preserving the social stability of the community...."[207] This dedication to the sure preservation of social stability is evident in his moderate position on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1849.

Beecher was strongly opposed to the Fugitive Slave Law and was especially averse to the provision requiring a bystander to help capture a fugitive. However, "he hesitated to argue that the law should be disobeyed for fear he would create a precedent that would undermine civil authority in general."[208]

Beecher "was and remained," according to May, "a sturdy defender of freedom, prosperity and the status quo."[209] It was Beecher's commitment to freedom that explains his leadership in various liberal social causes such as abolition and suffrage. In this he can truly be regarded as

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[207]Clark, p. 73.

[208]McLoughlin, p. 94.

[209]May, p. 72.

a liberal. But it was his commitment to prosperity and the status quo that explains his conservative strain. He espoused what McLoughlin called "liberal conservatism."[210]

After 1855, Beecher became progressively more identified with his wealthy Brooklyn parishioners. "Soon he was rationalizing their habits of conspicuous consumption and feelings of elitism."[211] These rationalizations became self-justifications as their habits became his habits.

Though Beecher's religious faith was remarkably liberated from and unaffected by orthodox interpretations, certain traditional views were retained. This was especially true in those areas touching upon social theory. "The emphasis on character development, the rejection of swift or radical changes...were taken from his religious faith...."[212] "Beecher reaffirmed the traditional view that success depended on industry, piety and frugality."[213] This view which Beecher held also believed that the inverse was true, that is that poverty was the result of the vices of the poor.

Though Beecher displayed some conservative social tendencies, he rejected the label "conservative." He saw himself as a progressive liberal. He said in his sermon,

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[210]McLoughlin, p. 42.

[211]Clark, p. 113.

[212]Ibid., p. 139.

[213]Ibid., p. 59.

"American Go," that "a dull, watery, sluggish brain may do for a conservative; but God never made them to be the fathers of progress."[214]

## Church and State

Beecher never clearly differentiated the roles of the church and the state. As he became more involved in political affairs, he began to view legislation as an appropriate tool in the construction of a Christian society. The combination of his post-millennial eschatology and his fervent nationalism resulted in Beecher identifying the future of America with the millennial kingdom of Christ. Beecher, especially during the war years, stirred patriotic fires by his continual calls for loyalty to the union. He equated the "destiny of the church with that of the state...The cause of the nation was the cause of Christ."[215]

The issue of church-state relations was not the subject of a great deal of comment by Beecher--at least not explicit or expanded comments. He seemed to view the church and state as mutually supportive. The state was to buttress the church (which church, he did not say). To Beecher, America would bring in the kingdom and she would do it with the church and state in partnership.

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[214]Henry Ward Beecher, Selections from Sermons, Lectures and Essays, ed. Arthur D. Hall (New York: Street and Smith Publishers, 1902), p. 148.

[215]Clark, p. 139.

## Summary

Henry Ward Beecher's political and social views included and can be summarized by the following propositions. The basis of liberty is moral education and development. Government should be limited and the corporate structure benevolent. Clergy should lead in the reconstruction of society by moral education and political involvement. Society will never be classless but there are no fixed class barriers. Society will inevitably advance and improve. Success for the individual is dependent on discipline and industry. Religious faith brings with it a commitment to social reform. The church and the state are to be mutually supportive.

## CHAPTER VII

## RELIGION AND POLITICS

Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century was not exclusively but was predominantly identified with political conservatism. The principal cause for this alignment involved the evangelical's pessimistic view of human nature. To the evangelical, a depraved, sinful nature within the individual was the root cause of the ills of society. At the same time, American conservatism was characterized by a skepticism about human reason, the human condition, nature and ability.[216] This skepticism was a political translation of the theological concept of depravity.

One of Beecher's contemporaries, William Shedd, expounded the "old school" view of human nature. It was still the predominant view among evangelicals. Shedd was for twenty-eight years professor of Church History at New York's famed Union Theological seminary. Shedd was one of the leading evangelical theologians of Beecher's day. Shedd speaks of the pervasive sinful nature when he says that "the

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[216]Russell Kirk, The Conservative Mind (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), pp. 7-8.

corruption resides not in one part only, but that there is nothing pure and uncontaminated by its mortal infection."[217] This is a most pessimistic view.

Shedd's view, the predominant evangelical view, was a position that was incompatible with political liberalism. It was the position of Lyman Beecher and was the view of Henry Ward Beecher during his early ministry.

Beecher believed in the inevitable progress of society. This belief could not co-exist with a belief in total depravity. Page Smith observes this fact in his discussion of the rise of transcendentalism. He says:

> With the appearance of transcendentalism, Americans had finally invented a religion that was the perfect expression of the secular-democratic consciousness.... Transcendentalism had about it a kind of inevitability. To believe in predestination, original sin (or radical human depravity) and in the inevitable progress of the United States was to strain reason beyond reasonable limits.[218]

Note that if a person accepts what Smith calls "radical human depravity," reason compels him to reject the idea of "inevitable progress." While Beecher seldom let logic deter him or dictate to him, in this case something had to give. Beecher abandoned the traditional (orthodox) view of depravity. This was essential in the formulation of

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[217]William G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1894), 2:197.

[218]Page Smith, The Nation Comes of Age (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), p. 524.

Beecher's "evangelical liberalism."

Beecher's brand of "evangelical liberalism" was a sort of transition form. It would evolve into a purer form of liberalism in the twentieth century. From a logical standpoint it was necessary for Beecher in order to advance his optimistic views on the certainty of human progress to shed his early beliefs on the inbred sinfulness of man's nature.

## Theological Beliefs of Evangelicals

In May of 1919, a group taking the name The World's Christian Fundamentals Association met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was out of this conference that the organized fundamentalist movement began to take shape. The organization required of its members adherence to nine points of doctrine, specifically: the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the trinity, the deity and virgin birth of Christ, the regeneration of believers, the personal and imminent return of Christ, and the resurrection and final assignment of all people to eternal blessedness or eternal woe.[219]

To those doctrinal points virtually all evangelicals subscribe. Evangelical confessions of faith will consistently reflect these doctrinal beliefs. Henry Ward

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[219]Bakers Dictionary of Theology, (1976), s.v. "The Fundamentals," p. 234.

Beecher, who accepted all of these doctrines as a young cleric, later rejected or became much less dogmatic on virtually all of these beliefs.

Beecher's political transformation paralleled closely his theological evolution. Of the nine points of doctrine outlined by the 1919 meeting in Philadelphia, three have significant political ramifications for the evangelical. These three beliefs are: (1) the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the creation and fall of man and (3) the personal and imminent return of Christ. Before examining the political implications of these doctrines, it is important to develop the meaning of these doctrines briefly.

Robert Mcafee Brown in his work The Spirit of Protestantism states, "the cornerstone of the fundamentalist edifice is the belief that the Bible is infallible and inspired in all its parts." He then adds, "Fundamentalists may differ at other points, but they will rally...in their appeal to an infallible Scripture."[220] What Brown observes of fundamentalism is true of evangelicalism as a whole. Evangelicals cite numerous passages in support of their view of Biblical infallibility. These include II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21 and the words of Jesus in John 10:35, "Scripture cannot be broken."[221] There are important

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[220]Robert Mcafee Brown, The Spirit of Protestantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 30.

[221]John 10:35, KJV.

political implications in the evangelical's dogmatic espousal that Scripture is absolute truth. Beecher virtually abandoned this orthodox view of the Scriptures in his later years.

The second major belief that will be briefly surveyed is the evangelical's belief in the creation and fall of man. The reference to the fall of man implies the doctrine of depravity. This belief is sometimes called original sin. To the evangelical, depravity denotes the corruption of the human nature and that there is nothing in man that can commend him to a righteous God. C.S. Lewis put it this way,

> human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way...they do not in fact behave that way...these two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.[222]

By depravity, the evangelical does not mean that man is not capable of benevolence, goodness and morality. But he does mean that man's natural tendency will be toward sin. His bent will be toward evil. He believes that man left to himself, unrestricted by societal mores, laws, traditions and moral codes, and unaided by God will inevitably degenerate.

Beecher was among the first American clergymen to embrace Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. He sought to

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[222]C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1976), p. 21.

reinterpret basic Christian beliefs such as the depravity of man "in terms congenial with the assured convictions of the latest scientific theories."[223] He continued to believe in man's sinfulness but without the doctrine of "original sin," it lost most of its punch. Beecher preached a gospel of "virtuous wealth" in contrast to the traditional Calvinistic view of wealth.[224] In this he chose to emphasize man's divine nature and his improveability. Here again was a gradual departure from the orthodox view.

The faith of Henry Ward Beecher was a happy and optimistic faith. He extolled "the virtues of the inner-directed person...."[225] To Henry, looking inward was to see virtue not sinfulness, a marked departure from the orthodox position.

The third major belief of the evangelical which will be examined because of its special political overtones is the belief in the personal, imminent return of Christ. Among evangelicals there are three eschatological schemes. They are (1) pre-millennialism, (2) a-millennialism and (3) post-millennialism. The term millennium refers to the belief in a thousand year reign of Christ on earth, a time of peace, prosperity and health.

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[223]Frank N. Magill, ed., Great Lives from American History (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J. Vol. I, 1987), p. 174.

[224]Ibid., p. 173.

[225]Clifford, Prologue, p. 4.

The eschatological view espoused by Henry Ward Beecher was post-millennialism. This view was very popular in the nineteenth century, went into eclipse during the first half of the twentieth century and has experienced a revival of interest in the seventies and eighties.

Post-millennialism was and is the only optimistic eschatological view among evangelicals. This view holds that the church will ultimately triumph over the powers of evil. It affirms that social conditions will improve until a golden age dawns. The golden age or millennium will be followed by a brief apostasy and then the return of Christ. Only the optimism of post-millennialism is consistent with political liberalism.

Post-millennial proponent, Dr. Loraine Boettner, emphases the optimism of Beecher's eschatological system when he writes:

> We live in the day of advancing victory.... Periods of spiritual advance and prosperity alternate with periods of spiritual decline and depression. But as one age succeeds another there is progress.... This process ultimately shall be completed, and before Christ comes again we shall see a Christianized world."[226]

Many evangelicals abandoned post-millennialism after two world wars and a worldwide depression during the first half of the twentieth century. But the nineteenth century spirit of optimism fit perfectly into a post-millennial system of

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[226]Loraine Boettner, The Millennium (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1957), p. 38.

eschatology and Henry Ward Beecher embodied it.

The theological and political evolution of Henry Ward Beecher is relevant to the contemporary political science landscape and to the controversy surrounding the rise of the "religious right." It is striking that the political interest and involvement of large numbers of evangelicals in the 1980s has worked to the benefit of conservative candidates. This phenomena is a logical occurrence resulting from evangelical theological assumptions. Henry Ward Beecher embraced political liberalism only as he distanced himself from his Calvinistic roots.

Researcher David R. Morgan observes that "A good deal of research suggests religious beliefs do matter politically and that, in particular, Protestant conservatives are likely to be socially conservative and perhaps politically conservative as well."[227] Those Morgan terms "Protestant conservatives" are those adherents to traditional orthodox Christianity. These, Morgan contends, are likely to be politically conservative. Only when Beecher moved from orthodox Christianity was he in a position to embrace political liberalism.

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[227]David R. Morgan, "Morality and Politics" (dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1972), p. 5.

## The Political Position of the Evangelical

Evangelicals wear a variety of political labels for an equal variety of reasons. But ultimately it is ideas and beliefs that determine political alignments. Beecher's father, Lyman, was one of the leading lights in American theology during the first half of the 19th century. He adhered strongly to orthodox evangelicalism. Henry, though, was repelled by Calvinism, and theology had no appeal for him.

The younger Beecher was uninterested in theory and abhorred theological debate as much as his father was enamored by it. As a result, Henry was not bound by traditional evangelical theology. Beecher had over 40 volumes published. But it was his book The Life of Jesus Christ (1871) that declared most clearly his unorthodox views and led to charges of heresy. These accusations intensified after he embraced evolution in Evolution and Religion (1885). By then he clearly was beyond the pale of evangelicalism. This gradual shift to theological liberalism cleared the path for Beecher's embrace of political liberalism.

The evangelical who is a political liberal is an anomaly. He is certainly sincere, as Beecher was, but is always at cross currents with himself. This internal tension drove Beecher to adjust his theology to fit with his natural optimism and political liberalism. Beecher's spiritual conflict mirrored the conflict of his affluent

urban congregation in Brooklyn. Many of his messages were designed to relieve the anxiety caused by the guilt of new wealth. Beecher preached a gospel of "virtuous wealth" as some have called it. This message relieved his listeners from the stern Puritan morality and Calvinistic theology.

The great majority of evangelicals have historically been aligned with political conservatism. The major assumptions of evangelicalism lead naturally and logically to certain conservative political tendencies. It is especially important to examine (1) evangelical intolerance, (2) the evangelical's belief in the limits of reason, (3) the evangelical's reluctance to rapid change, (4) his rejection of the radical improveability of society by the efforts of mankind. As Beecher liberalized theologically, he gradually jettisoned each of these evangelical political tendencies.

The first area due consideration is the problem of intolerance. It follows from the evangelical's belief in an absolutely inerrant Bible that he would be intolerant toward those who would differ with him. If the evangelical is intolerant, does that then tend to put him in the conservative political camp? The following resolution from the American Jewish Conference levels the indictment clearly:

> the device used by the evangelical right to intimidate and suppress difference is to claim for itself an absolute moral and political rectitude, allegedly validated by the Bible and confirmed by revelation.... They not only claim that they constitute a moral

> majority but act as if they possess a moral monopoly. We deplore...their use of fundamentalist piety as the principal measure of political competence, their readiness to invoke Divine authority...for every minute ephemeral political issue which they find of current interest.[228]

This resolution expresses a widely held concern about evangelical intolerance. Beecher as a young preacher steeped in evangelicalism evidenced this intolerance in his denunciation of Catholicism in general and the papacy specifically.

Beecher's intolerance during those early years extended beyond doctrinal issues to matters of ethics. This is clear in his early sermon series and first book, Seven Lectures to Young Men. These early pronouncements surely must have been a source of embarrassment to Beecher as his theological and political evolution progressed.

Clabaugh wrote of the fundamentalist's intolerance, "they still insist that they know the mind of the Maker."[229] Beecher eventually forsook absolutist positions and any claim that he knew the mind of the Maker. Nancy Barcus, a contemporary evangelical, writes that "toleration is a virtue only if balanced with discernment of the consequences

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[228]"Evangelical Right Hit for Misusing Religion," Arkansas Gazette, 5 November 1981.

[229]Gary K. Clabaugh, Thunder on the Right, the Protestant Fundamentalists (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1974), p. 176.

from God."[230]

The evangelical would argue that the person who acts in such a way so as to have destructive consequences to society justifies an intolerant attitude or even actions which would infringe on that person's individual rights. The destructive consequences to society are determined by the evangelical's absolute standard--the Bible. Beecher redefined the doctrine of inerrancy. This redefinition along with his accommodation of the theory of evolution allowed Beecher to greatly expand his concept of tolerance.

Beecher's early preaching focused on moral shibboleths. As his theology changed over the years, so did his emphasis. He spoke disparagingly of creeds, doctrines and denominationalism. He became an early ecumenist. From the time of his ordination when he was declared orthodox, Beecher shifted until he affirmed that the orthodox faith was not more than a guide. Early in his ministry he reflected a decidedly intolerant, anti-Catholic prejudice. His evolution is reflected in his later opinion that Catholicism also provides light.

The evangelical would agree with G. K. Chesterton. "Tolerance," he said, "is the virtue of people who don't

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[230]Barcus, "The Humanist Builds His House Upon the Sand," p. 27.

believe anything."[231] It certainly would be an overstatement to say that Beecher did not believe anything, but his beliefs became much less dogmatic as he grew older.

The epistemology of the evangelical is important in considering his political alignment. There is a logical connection between the evangelical assumption that man is depraved and his skepticism concerning reason. To the evangelical the corruption of human nature extends to all parts of the human being including the mind. He cites Paul, "that you walk no longer as the Gentiles in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God."[232]

The result of this belief in the limits of reason has sometimes been a rapid anti-intellectualism by which it has been caricatured. That result notwithstanding, it is a logical inference from the doctrine of depravity that man's reason and intellect cannot be trusted too far. Certainly, to the evangelical, if reason conflicts with Divine revelation, it is reason that is faulty, not revelation. The statement of contemporary theologian Edward J. Carnell in his book Christian Commitment affirms evangelical skepticism concerning human reason when he says:

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[231]James V. Schall, "The Nonexistence of Christian Political Philosophy," Worldview, XIX (April, 1976) 26-30, p. 27.

[232]Ephesians 4:17, 18 (NASB).

> Rationalism can define the conditions of validity but it is powerless to communicate a sense of moral duty.... We must acknowledge the limits of reason as a source of truth.... Why God made the world, and how He plans to dispose of it cannot be discovered by a scientific or philosophic analysis of the world itself.[233]

The evangelical does indeed place severe limits on the potential of human reason.

Beecher in contrast often spoke of the nobility of the human heart touched by God and the ideal of Christian manhood. He espoused the optimism of evolution and was receptive to the Biblical criticism coming out of Germany. He sought to allay fears of evangelical Christians concerning science and the new learning. His optimism concerning man and his potential was in stark contrast with the still dominant Calvinism.

Skepticism about the human condition and the potential of human rationality is characteristic of organic conservatism. This is readily seen in the writings of Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli and more recently Russell Kirk.

Some liberals would agree with conservatives that reason is limited in its potential. But the liberal concludes from this that he cannot therefore discover ultimate truth upon which to build an infallible political theory. Because of this the liberal believes that tolerance

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[233]Edward John Carnell, Christian Commitment (New York: Macmillan, 1957, pp 72, 247.

is in order.

On the other hand, the conservative (and the evangelical) in saying that reason is limited insists that absolute truth has been revealed. The conclusions of the conservative are far different than those of the liberal. On the whole, political and theological liberals remain far more optimistic about the human condition and the possibilities of human reason than do political conservatives and evangelicals.

Again it is obvious that the assumptions of the evangelical drive him to a politically conservative position. Beecher was a pioneer in the liberalizing of American theology. He was able to express his ideas in a popular style easily grasped by the masses. This was the source of his religious and political power.

Beecher's personal development, moving from a repudiation of his father's Calvinism to embrace theological liberalism mirrored a transformation in American society. The political implications of Beecher's development were enormous. When Beecher enthusiastically endorsed the tenets of evangelicalism, he also embraced conservative political positions. With his gradual departure from orthodoxy came an increasing advocacy of political liberalism.

The tendency of the organic conservative to oppose rapid change is compatible with evangelicalism. Robert M. Brown in his critical analysis of Protestantism notes that "it must be acknowledged that Protestantism has usually been

willing to sanctify the status quo...."[234] To the evangelical Christian the Scriptures teach a "chain of command" or hierarchy of authority. C.S. Lewis put it well,

> A Christian society is always insisting on obedience--obedience (and outward marks of respect) from all of us to properly appointed magistrates from children to parents and (I am afraid this is going to be very unpopular) from wives to husbands.[235]

Evangelical theology teaches order, submission and authority. It does not foster under usual conditions a revolutionary spirit. Beecher had jettisoned most of his earlier orthodoxy before he became an outspoken abolitionist and even condoned violence to further a just cause.

There are examples of evangelical Christians as radicals and revolutionaries. Some of these evangelical radicals would include the Reformation leaders in the sixteenth century, the Puritans of the seventeenth century and contemporary anti-abortion protesters. There were evangelical Christians during World War II who refused to obey Nazi laws. These examples though can be reconciled with the transcending tendency of the evangelical to resist radical change and to promote social stability.

Charles Colson in his book, Kingdoms in Conflict, gives three occasions when civil disobedience is justified for the evangelical:

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[234]Brown, The Spirit of Protestantism, p. 46.

[235]Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 80.

> Civil disobedience is clearly justified when government attempts to take over the role of the church or allegiance due only to God.... Civil disobedience is also mandated when the state restricts freedom of conscience.... The third justification for civil disobedience is probably the most difficult to call. It is applied when the state flagrantly ignores divinely mandated responsibilities to preserve life and maintain order and justice.[236]

These situations though are extraordinary, and the evangelical justifications for civil disobedience are closely circumscribed. Colson concludes, "When Christians engage in such activities (Civil disobedience), it must always be to demonstrate their submissiveness to God, not their defiance of government."[237] So, the evangelical under normal circumstances will tend to endorse the status quo and resist radical change.

A clear example of the evangelical resistance to change is seen in the influence of John Wesley in England. Church historian Earl Cairns writing from an evangelical perspective states that "Some subscribe to the idea that Wesley's preaching saved England from a revolution similar to that in France."[238] Russell Kirk seems to endorse that view when he comments that "John Wesley himself...was a high-minded social conservative, and his work helped

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[236]Charles Colson, Kingdoms in Conflict (New York and Grand Rapids: William Morrow and Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), pp. 247, 248.

[237]Ibid., p. 249.

[238]Earl E. Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 418.

infinitely in saving England from the Jacobin frenzy."[239] What Kirk does not address is that the reason Wesley was a social conservative and the reason he was resistant to radical social change was because of his evangelical assumptions. Wesley would have subscribed to all nine doctrinal points later set forth by the World's Christian Fundamental Association in 1919. Beecher was unwilling to accept things as they were. He rejected the status quo and became an advocate for change, for abolition, for women's rights and the cause of the poor.

Robert Booth Fowler in his study of the political thought of contemporary evangelicals recognizes the tendency of the evangelical toward political conservatism. Fowler in A New Engagement, Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976, observes that evangelicalism's

> stress on individual faith, its premillennialism, its concentration on the next world, its belief that finding Christ was so much more important than any other charge, its devotion to separation of church and state, its tradition of hostility to social action all had the same consequence. The result was, as we know, that evangelicals were leery of major social and political changes. The common sentiment was conservative.[240]

Fowler rightly links the evangelical's theology to his

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[239]Russell Kirk, A Program for Conservatives (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co.), p. 418.

[240]Robert Booth Fowler, A New Engagement, Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 5.

political conservatism. This linkage was as true in the 1870s, Beecher's heyday, as it was in the 1970s when Fowler observed the phenomenon. Beecher could move to a liberal political stance only as he jettisoned his evangelical theory.

The evangelical also resists radical change because of his assumption that sin is the basic problem in society. Gary Clabaugh recognized this when he wrote

> This belief [that sin is the root cause of every trouble in the world] lends itself quite handsomely to support of the socio-economic status quo...for if you believe that sin is the root cause of every trouble in the world, these troubles cannot be alleviated in any way but sanctification.[241]

So, the evangelical is accused of being indifferent to social injustices. He emphasizes instead personal salvation asserting that only individual salvation can solve the root problem which is sin.

As Beecher changed over the years, he emphasized less and less the need for personal salvation. He spoke rather of "moral suasion" and the power of religion to bring about change in society. He preached less about personal sin and more about societal injustice. This new emphasis was inconsistent with his earlier orthodox beliefs. It was quite consistent though with his new acceptance of evolution.

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[241]Clabaugh, Thunder on the Right, p. 182.

Another important political ramification that results from the evangelical's beliefs is the rejection by the evangelical of the possibility of radical improvement of society through human effort. This negative and skeptical view of the potential for progress in society which Beecher abandoned is consistent with political conservatism and is incompatible with political liberalism. Eugene McCarthy in his book A Liberal Answer to the Conservative Challenge said:

> The story of Western Civilization is in large measure the record of man's efforts to improve and perfect human society. It is a record of individual and personal effort, but also of community and political endeavor.[242]

This statement in many ways exemplifies the liberal outlook. It refers to the goal of improving and perfecting society, that this is to be accomplished by man's efforts and that it involves "political endeavor" envisioning a role for government.

The evangelical's negative opinion of man's ability to greatly improve society is based on his view of human nature. To the evangelical, a depraved, sinful nature in man is the cause of the ills in society. Therefore, if the problem is in man's nature, only that which can change man's nature has the potential to improve society. Nancy Barkus

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[242]Eugene McCarthy, A Liberal Answer to the Conservative Challenge (New York: Frederich A. Praeger, 1965), p. 38.

expressed it this way: "Our efforts to save the world are continuously confounded by the selfish counterplays of human nature."[243] Fowler in speaking of Billy Graham's view of society similarly notes that "the root cause of evil was not poverty, not race, and not war. Therefore, any means of change that did not modify the sinful proclivities of our vulnerable human hearts was unlikely to succeed."[244] The evangelical takes Jesus' words, "The poor you have always with you," to mean that poverty is the consequence of sin and that so long as there is sin, an earthly utopia is precluded. Beecher gradually abandoned his early belief in predestination and radical human depravity in lieu of his newfound belief in inevitable human progress.

Though there are exceptions, given the theological assumptions of the evangelical, he usually will espouse political positions consistent only with political conservatism. These positions include absolutism (intolerance), a limited view of the potential of reason, opposition to rapid change, and rejection of the inevitability of social progress.

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[243]Barcus, "The Humanist Builds His House," p. 27.

[244]Fowler, A New Engagement, p. 5.

## CHAPTER VIII

## THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF HENRY WARD BEECHER

Beecher's political influence in his lifetime and in succeeding generations has often been underestimated. He was a powerful force in American politics and deserves greater consideration among contemporary political scientists.

Beecher was a power in the anti-slavery movement and is worthy of consideration because of his contributions to the abolitionist political movement of the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote for one of the leading anti-slavery journals of the period, The Independent. The influence of this journal was substantial. While it struggled financially in the 1850s, it grew to claim a circulation of 24,000 by 1854 with subscribers increasing at a rate of 350-400 weekly. "Its rise, thereafter, was almost barometric, and reached the self-sustaining basis of close to fifty thousand in 1860."[245] It was largely Beecher's political

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[245]Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1960), p. 197.

commentary and his thoughts on the anti-slavery crusade that fueled this growth.

Equally important was Beecher's political role in the growth of the Woman's Suffrage movement. In May 1866 the Woman's Rights Convention was held in New York. The purpose of the convention was to beseech Congress to consider suffrage for women as an issue of urgency. Catts and Shuler observe that Theodore Tilton, Wendell Phillips and Henry Ward Beecher were on the program for the convention and that "there were no men who exercised a more compelling political leadership than they at that moment." They further emphasize Beecher's political influence in saying that "no voices in the land were so eloquent as those of Beecher and Phillips and their influence was enormous, with the people, with Congress and the Republican Party."[246] It is unlikely that a student of history or politics can fully appreciate the political landscape of the nineteenth century without a thorough consideration of Henry Ward Beecher.

Catts and Shuler point out that Beecher's enormous influence extended from the masses to the halls of Congress to even partisan Republican politics. Beecher had a role in the development of the Republican Party. As "a spearhead of

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[246]Carrie Chapman Catts and Nettie Rogers Shuler, Woman Suffrage and Politics (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 39-40.

the anti-slavery movement,"[247] Beecher encouraged the creation of the Republican Party. As a leader in the party, he greatly influenced American foreign policy during the Civil War. It was the opinion of General Robert E. Lee that "had it not been for Uncle Tom's Cabin and Beecher's speeches in the British Isles, the Confederacy could have secured the recognition of Britain and France,"[248] with all the moral and material assistance it would have involved. Beecher's party leadership did not end after the War. In 1884 Beecher became a leader of the dissident Republicans who bolted the party in favor of the Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland. These "Mugwumps" as they were called refused to support scandal tainted James G. Blaine. These reform minded Independent Republicans were instrumental in Cleveland's narrow victory. Beecher's leadership role further demonstrates the political power of this New York preacher.[249]

In addition to Beecher's political impact in the anti-slavery movement, the woman's suffrage movement and the Republican Party, there was his influence in the incipient Social Gospel movement. The social gospel "rejected the

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[247]A.L. Drummond, Story of American Protestantism (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), p. 360.

[248]Lyman Beecher Stowe, Saints, Sinners and Beechers (London: 1935), p. 293.

[249]Stefan Lorant, The Glorious Burden (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 383.

usual religious emphasis on matters of piety, metaphysics, and the supernatural, interpreting Christianity instead as a spirit of brotherhood made manifest in social ethics."[250]

"Many of the leaders of the social gospel acknowledged their debt to the illustrious preacher from Brooklyn...."[251] Indeed, Walter Rauschenbush (1861-1918), a German Lutheran turned Baptist, who "surpassed all others in advancing" the Social Gospel[252] built on Beecher's teachings. Rauschenbush who was twenty-six and pastoring a small Baptist church in New York City when Beecher died insisted on "a combination of personal regeneration and social reform."[253] Harry Emerson Fosdick, the leading proponent of the Social Gospel, specifically credited Beecher for his contribution to the Social Gospel. Both Rauschenbush and Fosdick greatly influenced the religious and political thought of another preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr.[254]

Walter Rauschenbush was a good friend of Lyman Abbott who was another pioneer in the Social Gospel movement.

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[250]Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 73.

[251]Winthrop Hudson, The Great Tradition of the American Church (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 173.

[252]Charles W. Koller, "Emphases in Preaching," in Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology, ed. Ralph G. Turnbull (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 21.

[253]Ibid.

[254]Parting the Waters, pp. 73, 695.

Abbott was a close friend, long-time associate and eventual successor of Henry Ward Beecher. Rauschenbush and Abbott knew each other and exchanged ideas through the Evangelical Alliance of New York City and another organization called the "Brotherhood of the Kingdom."[255] So, like links in a chain, King, the great twentieth century civil rights leader, is connected to Beecher, the great nineteenth century abolitionist.

Beecher early in his career determined that he would emphasize the love of God. One experience crystallized his thinking. Having just read one of the gospels, he was overwhelmed with the realization of the love of God for lost sinners. It was, he explained, like the love of his mother, "to whom his wrongdoing brought tears, but who never pressed him so close to her bosom as when he had done wrong...."[256] Like Rauschenbush, Beecher viewed social justice "as the closest possible approximation of God's love."[257]

While Henry Ward Beecher is worthy of examination by political scientists for a variety of reasons, his greatest relevance for contemporary political theorists rests primarily in his exemplifying how religious beliefs influence and to a great extent determine social and political attitudes.

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[255]Janet Forsythe Fishburn, The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family, The Social Gospel in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 4.

[256]Koller, Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology, p. 20.

[257]Branch, p. 74.

# CHAPTER IX

## BEECHER AND SOCIAL DARWINISM

The social thought of the last half of the nineteenth century relied heavily on the theory of evolution. Its major themes were known as social Darwinism. Social Darwinism emphasized the application of the concept of evolution to the development of society. In applying Darwinism to social questions, the political right defended the interests of privilege and opposed many social reforms.

Herbert Spencer, who greatly influenced Henry Ward Beecher (see page 28), exchanged Darwin's term "natural selection" for his own expression "survival of the fittest," a phrase that conveys an unrestricted struggle for existence. And, in fact, the theory was used to justify unrestrained competition and laissez-faire policies. It provided a pseudo-biological vindication for unfettered economic expansion.

Social Darwinists rejected social welfare programs. Poverty was evidence of one's unfitness to exist. Progress in society was dependent upon the elimination from society

of those who were unable to compete economically. Social stratification was justified. The unequal distribution of wealth was viewed as inevitable, necessary, and ultimately beneficial.

There is an obvious question that confronts the student of Beecher. How can Beecher, an apostle of love and proponent of social reform, have claimed to have been greatly influenced by such a cutthroat social theory as social Darwinism and the author of that theory, Herbert Spencer? There is no single answer to that question. There is no easy explanation. But several observations are important in understanding the seeming paradox.

There is a sense in which social Darwinism became all things to all people. Without question the right wing became most closely associated with the theory. But it is interesting that Darwinism was also used by social reformers to prove that no social, political, or economic institution --however entrenched by tradition--should be considered inviolate. So, it is not totally surprising that Beecher would credit the theory for influencing him.

Furthermore, it is likely that Beecher exaggerated the real influence of social Darwinism on his thinking. Beecher, as a popular preacher and as one who enjoyed popular acclaim, would naturally find a prominent place in his public pronouncements for the most in vogue social theory of the day. So, it is probable that Herbert Spencer was credited with being a greater influence on Beecher than

he really was. His impact was only tangential.

It should also be remembered that though the theory of social Darwinism is of only historical interest today, to Beecher it provided an important scientific rationale for his optimistic forecast for the future of the human species. Though social Darwinism conflicted with much of Beecher's thinking on such subjects as poverty and charity, it did provide a scientific framework for his basic optimism about human progress.

To understand the relationship between Henry Ward Beecher and the theory of social Darwinism one must realize that the pervading influence in Beecher's life was his religious faith. Beecher's Christianity shaded every other influence in his life. Beecher tempered the doctrine of social Darwinism with his Christianity. He tempered it with the Christian emphasis upon love and compassion. He tempered it with the Christian teaching concerning the value of the individual and human worth. He tempered it with the Christian spirit of altruism and the Christian responsibility to care for the poor. While Beecher could honestly write to Herbert Spencer and claim him as a great influence on his life, the social Darwinism that Beecher embraced was a great deal different from that espoused by a William Graham Sumner.

# CHAPTER X

## CONCLUSION

Beecher was called "a Puritan idealist."[258] He was. But he was not in the theological sense but rather in his love of liberty and his abhorrence of all forms of tyranny. He had a dualistic view of man as consisting of both an animalistic nature and divine nature. The divine nature, he believed, was capable of improvement and continual progress. This view made him especially sensitive to the value of the individual. This conviction moved him to champion the cause of Blacks and women. Beecher always waited until the time was expedient to speak out. This probably explains why he was less forceful in speaking out for the poor and for children. But once Beecher arrived at his staunch beliefs, he became a strong advocate of them.

Beecher believed he faced a dilemma of relevance. It was his opinion that he was confronted with the choice of adapting the faith of his father to the conditions of a new America so that it would be more appealing or of holding

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[258]Brastow, p. 99.

tenaciously to the old dogmas and see church attendance dwindle. Beecher was convinced that relevance demanded a modification in orthodoxy. In evolving a new theology, he "thus helped to pave the way for the Social Gospel."[259]

"Beecher advanced toward a new theological position slowly and cautiously. It was twenty years before he openly stated his liberal position...."[260] Henry's faith was one of love. His "gospel of love" taught that true religion was a love for God and one's fellow man. He rejected creeds, systematic theology, Calvinism, a literal hell, the inerrancy of Scripture and, in short, the basic tenets of orthodoxy.

Beecher was most emphatic in his repudiation of the orthodox view of man's nature. He was ambivalent toward the importance of a personal, individual conversion experience, the validity of miracles and the necessity of a divine Christ. He heartily embraced evolution and a Christocentric ecumenism. He became a trailblazer for the Social Gospel and the ecumenical movement.

Clark is accurate when he speaks of Beecher's "gradual rejection of many of his father's views."[261] It <u>was</u> gradual and can rightly be termed an evolutionary process. Brastow, along with many other writers, is cognizant of this

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[259]Clark, p. 136.

[260]McLoughlin, p. 38.

[261]Clark, p. 81.

evolution in Beecher's theology. Brastow, in acknowledging Beecher's changing theology, notes:

> It was his vocation to deal with old truths of evangelical Christianity, modified in conception and statement.... These modifications were in line with a broader and more humanistic view of human life, of the nature of man and God, of Christ and of the kingdom of redemption, than was prevalent in his early years.[262]

I have sought in this paper to demonstrate the modifications that occurred between Beecher's early years and his later ministry and to give evidence as to why and how these changes took place. Politically, his evolution parallels his theological modifications. Beecher's discarding of Calvinism and all that went with it (depravity and original sin) permitted him to create "a new romantic Christian liberalism."[263] He sought to expand human rights. He advocated the abolition of slavery. He worked tirelessly for voting rights for Blacks and women.

He was a worldly utopian who identified the future of America with God's kingdom on earth. He was optimistic that this utopia could be initiated through the political involvement of Christians, especially the clergy. He incorporated a tempered brand of social Darwinism into his evangelical liberalism. He did not clearly delineate the distinction between church and state. He blurred the lines between them and portrayed them as mutually supportive.

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[262]Brastow, p. 107.

[263]Clark, p. 81.

He did not advocate a classless society but was convinced that all levels of society were spiraling upward and that given enough freedom and moral training the lower classes would be elevated. He believed that the American corporate structure would through its benevolence, aid the poor and thus encourage upward mobility.

He was not a radical and in fact was conservative on a number of issues including immigration, labor unions and the government's role in enforcing Black voting rights. He argued for a limited government fearing that individual freedoms would be trampled underfoot by even a benevolent central government if it were too large.

The American mindset was prepared for Beecher's "Evangelical Liberalism." "Americans by the 1860s had grown more and more skeptical about Protestant theology, especially Congregationalism and Presbyterianism."[264] This disillusionment contributed to the success of Beecher's philosophy of optimism, positivism and enthusiasm.

In the nineteenth century, there were many who were greater thinkers, greater logicians, greater theorists but there was none greater than Henry Ward Beecher in the moving and molding of public opinion. French and Royce in their work, Portraits of a Nineteenth Century Family, relate the following Beecher experience that occurred during Beecher's three month vacation in Europe and his speaking tour of

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[264]French and Royce, p. 116.

Great Britain. It occurred in Liverpool where Beecher addressed an extremely hostile audience which had prevented Beecher from speaking for more than an hour.

> A number in the audience were armed and authorities feared for Henry Ward's safety. He waited patiently and then gave an eloquent speech, answering questions hurled at him by the irate listeners. One man shouted: "We don't sympathize with slavery, but we go for the South because they are the weaker party." Henry Ward retorted: "Go then, and sympathize with the devil--he was the weaker party also when he rebelled and was turned out of heaven. Yours is a good enough argument for school-boys ten years of age...but when the principles of liberty and slavery are the questions, it is a shame for a man of your age to talk that way." By the time he reached London, Henry Ward was the talk of the city.... Suddenly they were acclaiming him a hero.[265]

This single episode is included here because it clearly demonstrates Beecher's oratorical power, his biting wit and his passionate feeling for freedom.

Most of the broad range of biographies of Henry Ward Beecher display each one their own peculiar bias. The plethora of books on Beecher that appeared following his death were almost entirely pro-Beecher. Then in 1927, Paxton Hibben's Henry Ward Beecher, An American Portrait, made a strong attack on Beecher's character and intellectual honesty. More contemporary studies have displayed greater objectivity and scholarship. In this category, none excel the perceptive work of William McLoughlin who summarized Beecher's contribution to American society when he said that

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[265]French and Royce, p. 114.

Beecher's ministry performed a wedding; "Spencerian science and Liberal Protestantism walked hand in hand down the aisle of Plymouth Church. The marriage lasted almost a century.[266]

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[266]McLoughlin, pp. 249-250.

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