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Samuel J. Smith

October 15, 2017
In his 2013 book *Founding Zealots: How Evangelicals Created America’s First Public Schools*, Thomas A. Hagedorn argued that Horace Mann’s status as the “Father of the Common School Movement” is a myth. Hagedorn reframed the narrative, and—instead of individuals—he placed in the leading roles philosophical thought, political trends, religious revivals, and doctrinal developments. Hagedorn indeed highlighted individuals, such as Samuel Lewis, Calvin Stowe, Lyman Beecher, William McGuffey, and many others, but he turned the spotlight primarily to the influence that Christianity had on the development of the common schools. The purpose of this paper is to explore further the doctrinal beliefs of the Lyman Beecher family and how those beliefs served as impetus for their reform activities. As James W. Fraser noted, the Beecher family was extremely active in a variety of social reforms, education being just one of many. This topic is significant today because, in their university teacher preparation programs, many current teacher candidates may be exposed to only part of the story, that Horace Mann started public schools because he wanted to eliminate poverty, crime, and social injustice. In an effort to represent the Common School Movement more fully, this study will focus specifically on the contributions of the Beecher family and their intent for advocating for common schools. To that end, a review was conducted of select primary sources and several secondary sources, including books and research journal articles. Although the focus is on the Lyman Beecher family in general, special attention is given to Lyman’s daughter Catharine.

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“This country is inhabited by saints, sinners and Beechers,” said Leonard Bacon, a close friend of the Beecher family. The quote reflects the major theme of Lyman Beecher Stowe’s 1934 book. As a descendent of the Beecher family, Stowe explained that the Beechers were more complex than most novice students of history may realize. Beechers could not easily be categorized as either saints or sinners, so Stowe granted them their own category. There are many less prominent though dramatic Beecher figures, but Lyman and his daughter Catharine are the two most relevant to this study.

**Lyman Beecher: Father, Theologian, and Social Reformer**

Thomas W. Hagedorn held up Lyman Beecher as exemplifying the antebellum reformers more so than any other individual. Like many of the other “zealots” to whom Hagedorn credited with creating public schools in the U.S., Beecher was a Yankee, descended from Puritans, and strongly influenced by Calvinistic doctrine. Beecher enrolled in Yale where Reverend Timothy Dwight’s preaching brought revival to the campus and led Beecher to a spiritual transformation in 1796. Nathaniel William Taylor also directly influenced him to follow New Haven Theology and to become involved in revivals and missions. In 1826, the conservative Hanover Street Congregational Church in Boston called him to join them in their fight against the Unitarians, who rejected orthodox Calvinist doctrines of the original sin, salvation, hell, and the trinity. In 1830, he accepted an offer to become the first president of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati. He felt called to the West for two reasons: (1) the growth of


Catholicism in that area concerned him, and (2) he believed that the West was ripe for revival before the imminent return of Christ.

Mark A. Noll described Lyman Beecher as an activist who directed the energy of the Second Great Awakening revivalism into reform movements. Noll acknowledged, at least to some degree, the historiographical validity of those who represent Beecher as one who sought to “control an American society that was escaping their grip.” He described Beecher’s *Plea* as a “strongly worded tract” that warned of the looming danger to democratic freedoms and to Christianity itself if Roman Catholicism were not limited on the Western Frontier. He also discussed Beecher’s activism in the temperance movement, abolition, and in publications that called for a Christian moral purpose in the U.S.

**Calls from the Pulpit for Social Reform**

The Reverend Beecher’s concern for social reform was evident in his sermons. He preached sermons entitled “The Remedy for Dueling” and “The Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance.” He also preached sermons that provided specific insight into his views on education. One such sermon was preached in New London in 1804 and was


6. Ibid., 208.

7. Ibid., 296.

8. Ibid., 314-315.

9. Ibid., 410.

entitled “The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for that Purpose.”

His message opened with a reference to Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 regarding a cord of three strands not being easily broken. The message continued on to discuss how family, church, and society must collaborate to defeat vice. In 1812, he preached a sermon in New Haven entitled, “A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensable.” The text for this sermon was Ezekiel 33:10, “Son of man, say to the Israelites, ‘This is what you are saying: Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?’” (King James Version). This message discussed the declension of individual and societal morality, mentioned the need for religious education, and acknowledged that a reformation had already begun. The conclusion was a clear call for repentance. Throughout both sermons was a clear call for universal mass education so that morality could be instilled systematically.

In an 1828 sermon entitled “Resources of the Adversary, and Means of their Destruction,” Beecher addressed the need for the church to display more faith, intense love, and decided action. It is the final element of action that demonstrated his activist spirit. The message casted a vision of an imminent army with plentiful munitions being implemented for Kingdom work. Beecher lamented, however, that the nation was at that time “panic-struck,” skirmishing around before the battle. He called his listeners to action, indicating that “nothing


12. Ibid.


14. Ibid., 517.
great on earth, good or bad, was ever accomplished without decisive action.”

He also called for more courage and more evangelistic efforts to bring about church growth. Specifically regarding education, he stated, “Special effort is required, to secure to the rising generation an Education free from the influence of bad example, and more decidedly Evangelical” (p. 521).

He expounded on this by discussing the environment children experience and the great need for common schools to be part of that experience. He decried the effort in colleges to “separate religion from science” but expressed his belief in the right of parents to send their children to colleges that do so.

Activism beyond the Pulpit

Beecher’s activist sensibilities were present from the very beginning of his ministry. In addition to drawing individuals to a conversion experience, he saw his role as a pastor to reform and transform the nation. His activist efforts were carried out in missions, Sunday schools, and literature distribution. Even the revival itself was an instrument that would lead to parachurch organizations for the purpose of reforming the ills of society. Although he valued theology and was consistent with his daily study routine, he approached his role of theologian as that of “physician, who would go to the store of the apothecary to be applied.”

His daughter Harriet


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 91.
wrote that her father considered “a sermon that did not induce any body to do any thing . . . a sermon thrown away.”

In his article entitled “Lyman Beecher’s Nativist History,” Michael Schnell, a critic of Beecher, pointed out the irony of Beecher’s efforts to limit the role of Catholicism in the United States. He thusly paraphrased Beecher’s argument: “Because Catholics are propagating their anti-democratic beliefs through immigration and education, Protestants must defend democracy by controlling immigration, protecting their children from Catholic influence, and supporting Protestant education.”

Schnell described Beecher as a prominent but controversial pastor, who—although not directly involved in politics himself—incited violence against Catholics through his preaching and publications. Beecher’s views were described by Schnell as “authoritarian, bigoted, and hence profoundly dangerous.”

Ironically, Beecher was an abolitionist, but because of what his students and faculty perceived was not a direct enough stand on the issue, many withdrew and quit Lane Theological Seminary to go to Oberlin College.

Schnell painted Beecher’s brand of activism not as progressive but as regressive, a desire to take society back to a better time and place, reminiscent of how it was in Jonathan Edwards’ New England. Schnell quoted Stuart Henry’s description of Beecher as one who “lived in the present, but his heart was often in bondage to the past.”

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22. Ibid., 28.

23. Ibid., 32.
Beecher not only stood in opposition to Catholics but also led a campaign against Unitarianism. One point of conflict was their different views on revivalism. Beecher supported the revivalist movement, but Unitarians did not value the movement as contributing positively to society. Between 1820 and 1840, the Boston population doubled, which brought with it many problems, moral declension being a primary issue. To Beecher, it was useless to rely on any other means of social reform than conversion to Christ. Therefore, he rejected the Unitarian proposals for solutions that were based in “science, legislation, philosophy, eloquence and argument.”

Unitarians criticized the Beecherites for their harsh tone in the argument. One of Beecher’s concerns was the “perverted literature” in the curriculum of the common schools that was written by liberal Unitarians. The Unitarians sought to provide all children, especially the poor, a practical and moral education. Without the teaching of Bible doctrine, this was insufficient for the Beecherites.

Lyman Beecher’s impact specifically on the field of education was noted in James W. Fraser’s book Pedagogue for God’s Kingdom: Lyman Beecher and the Second Great Awakening (1985). Fraser’s work covered Beecher’s own educational experiences and also his work in voluntary associations, revivalism, churches, higher education, and the public school movement. Although Beecher was an influential voice in the common school movement in Ohio, it was his

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25. Ibid., 197.

26. Ibid., 199.
son-in-law Calvin Stowe who is often given the title of “Father of Common Schools in Ohio.” Calvin was married to Lyman’s daughter Harriet, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Calvin was commissioned by the Ohio legislature to visit Prussia in order to study its educational system. Upon his return, he voiced admiration for the Prussian system, especially its educational philosophy that was influenced by Reformation thought and its commitment to compulsory education.28

**Catharine Beecher**

Among other reform-minded church women of the nineteenth century—such as the Grimke sisters and Dorothea Dix, Catharine Beecher deserves to be ranked for her legacy as an activist for women’s education.29 A number of prominent textbooks for Foundations of Education courses mention Catharine Beecher as an advocate for women’s education and as a recruiter of women for teacher preparation, specifically to serve in frontier schools in the West.30 Feminist perspectives critique her for limiting women to nurturing roles at home and in the


school. These textbooks rarely mention the worldview that drove Beecher or the context of the Second Great Awakening. Most textbooks and courses simply omit her altogether.

Catharine’s Views of the Woman’s Role in Society

In 1874, Catharine wrote *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, which she dedicated to the “American women, who, as housekeepers, mothers, and school teachers, are to decide the safety and prosperity of our country.”\(^{31}\) This dedication alone was significant in that it conveyed the role she believed women should play in society, specifically in domestic and nurturing roles. In this work, she addressed topics regarding her philosophy pertaining to the intellectual connection to domestic work and pedagogical training required for women desiring to become teachers. She reminisced on topics related to her own education and on the impact her family had on her development. Acknowledging the controversy of women who seek to enter men’s colleges, Beecher presented the benefits for women to attend institutions of higher learning that specifically address a curriculum more appropriate to female endeavors. The faculties of reason and common sense were presented as valuable commodities for a woman to develop. She pictured women as empowered to impact society by the decisions they make in governing their homes. Such decisions, she argued, are subject to the husbands veto, “which in most sensible families is seldom used.”\(^{32}\) Throughout her reminiscences, she portrayed women in traditional roles while always attributing great honor and dignity to these roles.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 8.
In a published research study as recent as 2009, Catharine was presented as an example of a nineteenth-century Puritan woman’s perspective of how art and culture were cultivated in the home. Although the focus of the article was on Catharine’s perspectives on home design, it also reflected a great deal of her philosophy of family, children, and home life in general. Beecher’s own family was described—how she was the eldest daughter and that ministry, reform efforts, and practical dissemination of knowledge were all woven together in her activities. Other topics in the article addressed (1) Puritan influence on Beecher’s conception of “home”; (2) Beecher’s preference for utility and “Spartan” modest living; (3) Beecher’s idealism expressed in her “untested ideas”; (4) and Beecher’s spirit of democracy.

Today’s feminists are reluctant to embrace Catharine as a role model. For instance, one critic—Catherine Villanueva Gardner—critiqued Beecher’s philosophical and ethical perspectives regarding the role of women in society and vacillated in whether or not to declare Catharine a true feminist in the sense of current views. Two reasons Gardner provided to support the consideration of Beecher as a feminist included observations that (1) Catharine perceived herself as working toward the empowerment of women, and (2) Catharine was the only female voice in Common Sense philosophy and Calvinist theology. Nevertheless, she did not push the boundaries of the role of women in her times as much as many feminists wish she had and is, therefore, not embraced by most recent feminists. Though advocating for women’s


education and promoting them as the ideal moral educators for children, she did not envision a transformation in their social order in relation to men, as this social order was divinely ordained. This, Beecher believed, was God’s plan for the happiness of humanity. Women, however, held a measure of power over men in their role as the moral education of children. Though the virtues she held as most important for women to display were submission and self-denial, it was through these virtues that women gained influence in society. She opposed women’s suffrage, believing it inappropriate for women to enter the traditional arenas of men.

Catharine’s Views Regarding the Education of Children

At the time that Catharine wrote *Religious Training of Children in the School, the Family, and the Church* (1864), she had been involved in educating more than a thousand women over a span of nearly four decades. This work presented her philosophy of education and addressed a process of religious training for children and also the rationale for doing so. She clearly delineated roles for both the family and the church, and emphasized specifically the woman’s role. Her understanding of childhood development was conveyed from infancy through adulthood, and—even though there seemed to be allusions to Rousseau’s principles of early childhood—the nature of the learner was more Calvinistic. In her discussion of religious and moral development of the child, she often quoted Scripture. For instance, she noted that children learn from natural consequences by “tasting the tree of knowledge of good and evil” and that from the very beginning of their lives they needed to learn to “walk by faith and not by sight.”35 She stressed the direct teaching of good and evil and the importance of obedience.

Since Catharine was such a proponent for teacher training, it is interesting to see how she is portrayed today in current textbooks used in university programs for teacher preparation. For example, in Gerald Gutek’s *Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education: A Biographical Introduction* (2011), he highlighted Catharine in a discussion on John Calvin’s influence on American education. He described her as “a persuasive advocate of women’s education and common schools” (p. 123).³⁶ He explained how, as a daughter and sister of ministers, Catharine shared her family’s Calvinist sensibilities and integrated these doctrinal principles into her writings and actions. Gutek discussed Catharine’s 1829 book *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education* in which she presented the teacher’s role primarily as being that of a moral agent to develop students’ values. Gutek called her an “early advocate of character education” as she called for the church, family, and school to collaborate toward common moral principles.³⁷ Beecher and other common school proponents pushed for two Calvinist elements to be pervasive in American schools: (1) an individual work ethic and (2) an emphasis on commonly shared societal values. To this end, Beecher advocated for a public school curriculum that would reflect values shared by the majority, which was predominantly Protestant. By so doing, her belief was that this would help strengthen, especially in the growing Western Frontier, the values that had made New England strong: capitalism, diligence, hard work, order, industriousness, and other traits that were passed down from the Puritan heritage.


³⁷ Ibid.
In his *Philosophical, Ideological, and Theoretical Perspectives on Education* (2014), Gutek discussed Catharine Beecher in a section entitled “Neo-Conservative Interpretation of the American Past.” Gutek presented her as a “pioneer teacher educator” who “held ideas that contemporary Conservatives would endorse” (p. 260).\(^{38}\) Beecher perceived Evangelical Christianity as a vital part of normal schools where female teacher candidates were prepared to be missionaries not just of the Gospel of Christ but also of Western culture and of common civic virtues. She believed that women inherently would make better teachers in the growing common school movement because they were naturally more nurturing and would therefore serve as better moral examples than men would to tame the Western Frontier. She promoted a common curriculum for all students that would promote a common language for all, including the increasingly diverse immigrant population.

More so than other such textbooks, *Foundations of Education* (2017)—by Allan C. Ornstein, Daniel U. Levine, Gerald L. Gutek, and David E. Vocke—dedicated a relatively large amount of attention to Catharine Beecher. Interestingly, though, the section opens with a statement that misleads the reader into thinking that Catharine was a prominent leader among such suffragettes as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Willard, and Susan B. Anthony.\(^{39}\) To the contrary, she was opposed to women’s suffrage, believing that women should leave the world of politics to men. She is credited with having established the Harford Female Seminary and the Western Female Institute, a normal school to prepare teacher candidates to serve in Frontier


schools. There are three reasons given for Beecher’s move to promote women as teachers: (1) teaching was one of the few socially acceptable careers for women at the time, (2); it provided a means of financial independence for especially unmarried women; and (3) it allowed women a degree of empowerment as they influenced the moral tone of the nation. Her goal was to recruit ninety thousand teachers who would be willing to move to the Western Frontier with a missional mindset of taming this crude region.\textsuperscript{40}

Janice B. Tehie, in her textbook, chose to discuss Catharine Beecher in the context of a section on “Teacher Unions: Protection for Teachers,” which seems a bit misplaced chronologically, especially since this chapter is entitled “Urbanization and Expansion of the Public Schools (1890-1930)”\textsuperscript{41} and since Catharine had died by 1878. Nevertheless, the point Tehie made in the section is understood and appreciated. Women, because of their nurturing sensibilities, are generally perceived by society as being more fit than are men to teach young students, especially in the elementary grades. The feminization of the teaching force increased after 1870, especially in the Northeast where the Common School Movement was initiated. Proponents, such as Emma Willard and Catharine Beecher, encouraged the feminization of the field, arguing that women naturally made better teachers because that is how God designed them—with more patience and a maternal instinct to understand young minds. In 1870, sixty percent of the nation’s teachers were women. By 1920, it was eighty-six percent and continues to be a similar figure today.

\textsuperscript{40} Ornstein, Levine, Gutek, and Vocke, \textit{Foundations of Education}, 139.

\textsuperscript{41} Tehie, \textit{Historical Foundations of Education}, 204.
Even novice students are familiar with the *McGuffey Readers* and their impact on American education; however, most are unaware that they could have very easily been the “*Beecher Readers*.” A Cincinnati publisher approached Catherine Beecher to write a series of readers that he could market to the expanding school market in the South and the West. As Fraser noted, “Because she was then heavily involved in her campaign for women’s education, she declined, recommending one of the people she and her father had met at [a conference], William Holmes McGuffey.”

**Conclusion**

Though Hagedorn and others are to be commended for highlighting the impact of Beecherites on the Common School Movement, most likely, the name Horace Mann will continue to be the most recognized for this educational development in the United States. The literature reviewed for this paper supports the notion that the Lyman Beecher family and their beliefs were just as influential, if not more so, than Mann’s efforts. Far from perfect, the Beechers had their critics, and rightly so—especially regarding Lyman’s open hostility toward Catholicism. As Leonard Bacon observed, “This country is inhabited by saints, sinners, and Beechers.” This country could use a few Beechers right now!

42. Fraser, *Pedaguogue for God’s Kingdom*, 138-139.
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