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The Trial of Henry Ward Beecher - Part I

Lead: Religion was important in nineteenth-century America. Its influence was in no way better demonstrated than in the prominence of the Beecher family.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Religion has played a vital role in the shaping of the American experience. While the Founders created a secular state, it was in many ways the only choice they had. So prevalent was religion

in its various forms that only a government that was neutral could possibly deal fairly with all the churches and sects that had established themselves in America even by the 1780s. The Founders were determined that no state church would encumber the tender consciences or drain the pocketbooks of those of the unwilling. The Founders were also painfully aware of the scars that remained on the European landscape after three centuries of religious warfare and intolerance. However, this official secular bias or lack of bias did not mean Americans were irreligious. In fact, the history

of the United States is replete with examples of the powerful influence of religion over political, social, and economic life. Even in the late twentieth century church attendance and participation in America outstripped that of any other developed country.

During the nineteenth century, religion played an important defining role in many of the issues that faced the nation. The crusade against slavery was led by religious people for religious reasons. The campaign against liquor and all its works came from deeply committed religious motives. Religious people

also played an important leadership role in the campaign for women's rights. On issue after issue the secular state was moved toward reform by those motivated by religious reasons.

During the 1800s few families were more influential on matters of a moral nature than the Beecher family. Lyman Beecher was a clergyman, President of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Seven of his thirteen children achieved what might be called prominence as public leaders. Whether as writers, educators, ministers, or agitators, the Beecher

clan made its mark. A daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin and through it enflamed both sides on the slavery question. A son, Henry Ward Beecher, arguably was the most famous preacher of his generation. Showing little promise as a student, the younger Beecher as a pastor soon cultivated an animated and casual preaching style unlike the dry and often boring manner of many other preachers of the era, but he also attracted notoriety and trouble. Next time: Henry Ward Beecher is sued for adultery in the trial of the decade.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

Clark, Clifford E., Jr. *Henry Ward Beecher: Spokesman for a Middle-Class America.* Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982.

McLoughlin, William G. *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870.* New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.