



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
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Religious Freedom in Ednah Dow Cheney (1824–1904)

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Ednah Dow Cheney's belief in pluralism and freedom of thought, influenced her commitment to religious freedom. Religious freedom meant being open to inquiry, human progress, science, and toleration. Neither religion nor any "human soul" is denied access to the "Divine Centre" yet each religion keeps its individuality at the circumference. Each home is good, only when it receives neighbors and exchanges friendly visits, for the "hope of immortality [...] rests on foundations as broad as all humanity." Religions are free to develop along with cultures as when they specifically acknowledged the injustice of slavery. Religions complain that the "presence of women desecrates many of the holy places of the church" and so do not receive them into the active service and honors of the church, but will welcome women, when religions "of humanity" see God as "father and mother." Religions are close to both nature and art: "No man can be truly great or religious without a deep and abiding faith in Nature." And "In every revival of the spirit of religion we see a renewal of devotion to Nature." Art, too "has always held its place close to religion" for its "universal hold" and its "representation of the divine." Truth is Eternal, but when people hold religion above Truth, as Coleridge claimed, those persons will love themselves above all. Religious freedom, shored by nature, art, and Truth, requires toleration of all religions and equal treatment of the sexes and races. Cheney, a Unitarian, was a leader in the "Free Religious Association," and at times preached and eulogized though not always welcomed to do so at various churches. She advocated for religious freedom in *The Radical*, *The Index* and *The Christian Examiner* arguing that phases of truth be subject to inquiry and change else they be "encrusted with superstition."

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