
In her book Preaching Eugenics, Christine Rosen provides an insightful look at the leaders of America’s eugenics movement as well as the mercurial relationship that existed between religion and science during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rosen focuses on spokesmen for liberal Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism in order to elucidate the zeal with which many liberal-minded religious leaders embraced eugenic science. But this embrace was not without its detractors; there were various apprehensions that plagued the religious acceptance of eugenics through its rise and fall. More broadly, Rosen’s work complicates our historical understanding of how American religion interacted and continues to interact with modern science relating to human subjectivity.

Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, first coined the term “eugenics” in 1883 to “describe his plan to improve the human race through better breeding.” Hoping to accelerate and redirect natural selection, Galton wanted eugenics to become “like a new religion” (5). Though seemingly a forced juxtaposition, eugenic scientists and liberal Protestant religious leaders often had similar objectives and worked together to spread the message of eugenics and social reform. Social reform became the space in which science and religion worked cooperatively toward a common goal (14). Beginning in the 1880s, many Protestant adherents of the Social Gospel saw the eugenics movement as an empirical method that would help to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth by improving society. Linked with a postmillennial worldview and a desire to implement “applied Christianity,” some liberal Protestant supporters proved that the boundary between religion and what they believed to be reputable science was fluid during the early twentieth century (27).

Evangelical Christians were frequently opposed to eugenics and often challenged the goals of eugenicists and their religious allies. While eugenic supporters backed legislation for marriage regulation and the sterilization of the “feebleminded,” many ministers (often those opposed to the Social Gospel) warned against the dangers of this movement. “These evangelical Protestants,” Rosen writes, “decried the churches’ ‘dilettante concern with sociological minutiae’ and the resulting neglect of spiritual concerns among the clergy” (66).

Jewish participation in the eugenics movement was limited as the use of eugenics to promote anti-Semitism repelled most American rabbis. Rabbi Max Reichler was a notable exception to this tendency. According to Rosen, his work in the eugenics movement marked “the first attempt by a rabbi to reconcile eugenics with the Jewish faith.” Though wary of anti-Semitic leanings within the movement, he promoted eugenics by likening the methods of eugenics to Talmudic teachings on marriage and reproduction, (108-109).

Most Catholics during this time period were against eugenics and opposed sterilization and birth control. Father John A. Ryan and Father John Cooper were among a small minority of American Catholic priests who offered at least tepid support for eugenics. While Ryan supported the cause in name only, Cooper’s support for eugenic theories hinged on the movement’s credibility in scientific reasoning. With the movement’s “scientific credibility” at stake, Cooper taught both the Church’s obligation to “race betterment” as well as close evaluation of eugenic science. Cooper eventually withdrew his support as geneticists undermined eugenicist scientific credibility.

Eugenics began to dwindle in the 1930s, and the movement “now touted negative eugenic methods as a means of stabilizing the crisis-laden institutions of home and family, not for eradicating the ‘menace of the feebleminded,’” (167). Without scientific backing, eugenics could not maintain its base of support. In her conclusion, Rosen asks how eugenics could
ever have had the support from religious leaders that it once did. She describes eugenic proponents as “liberals and moderates in their respective faiths—those who challenged their churches to conform to modern circumstances—became the eugenics movements most enthusiastic supporters” (184). She hopes that by looking more closely at this historical relationship, we will use caution when considering questions on improving the human condition with modern science.

A lucid text, *Preaching Eugenics* would be an excellent addition to a graduate seminar. Applicable both to American religious history as well as science and religion, Rosen’s text, with its open-ended conclusion, will allow for productive classroom discussion.

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