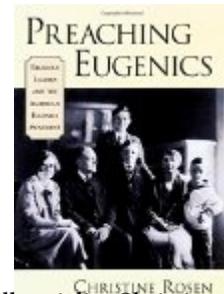


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christine Rosen. *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. viii + 286 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515679-9.

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While conducting archival research into the history of eugenics in the United States, I regularly came across the names of various rabbis, reverends, and ministers, and always wondered what role they played in the eugenics movement. How did they reconcile and meld science and religion? Did they actively promote sterilization, immigration restriction, and birth control from the pulpit? Did they formulate theological justifications for “playing God” with biological destiny? Were there significant differences between Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish approaches to selective breeding? How was Sir Francis Galton’s entreaty to introduce eugenics like a “new religion” into the national conscience received among America’s spiritual elite?

Christine Rosen’s solidly researched and thoughtfully argued book explores these and many other important questions. *Preaching Eugenics* adds an original perspective that has been sorely lacking in the scholarship on eugenics in the United States. Rosen does a superb job of situating key religious leaders in the networks of organized eugenics, primarily through a close examination of the activities of clergy in the American Eugenics Society (AES). She documents their positions on AES boards and committees; relationships with well-known American eugenicists; and shared visions of human improvement as well as the causes for ongoing tensions and outright ruptures in their professional relationships.

Rosen effectively demonstrates that, regardless of denomination, most of the religious leaders who embraced eugenics were “modernistic liberals” searching for promising avenues of Progressive social reform. Yet of all religious groups, Protestants “proved the most enthusiastic and numerically powerful group of religious participants in the eugenics movement” (p. 15). For the most

part, these Protestants were postmillennialist Christians who ardently believed in the Social Gospel ideals of “applied Christianity” and building the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Conversely, premillennialist Christians, identified principally as evangelicals, viewed intervening in the material world as arrogant, futile, and antithetical to Biblical doctrine. If the theological interpretation of liberal Protestants made them more receptive to eugenic ideas, then the anti-Semitic implications of much eugenic thought as well as the strictures of moral doctrine made Jewish and Catholic leaders, respectively, tread more cautious and conflicted paths to eugenic advocacy.

Rosen deftly navigates these differences and their ramifications in *Preaching Eugenics*, explaining why, for example, many liberal Protestants strongly supported eugenic marriage certificates (because they did not challenge the sacredness of the institution of marriage), why rabbis diverged so greatly in their opinions on the biological and social virtues of intermarriage, and how several prominent Catholic clergy could simultaneously champion sterilization (because it privileged the common good over the individual, as dictated by Natural Law) and reject birth control (because it perverted the most basic of human faculties and represented the selfishness and materialism of modern culture). Her analysis of the varied responses of Catholics to eugenics is particularly astute. Arguing that Catholics did not arrive at a “denunciation of eugenics as quickly or neatly as historians have suggested” (p. 139), Rosen profiles Fr. John A. Ryan and Fr. John M. Cooper, both of whom sought, through active AES membership, to bring Catholicism and eugenics into harmony in the 1920s and early 1930s. Ultimately, however, each tendered his resignation, mainly because of growing discomfort with mainstream eugenicists’ pro-

motion of sterilization and, most important, birth control. Nevertheless, Rosen suggests that Catholics such as Ryan and Cooper were able to sustain their relationship with the AES for more than a decade because they drew clear distinctions “between eugenic means and eugenic ends” (p. 153). While a tad too simplistic, this clarification—between means and ends—does offer insight into the continuum conceptualized by many religious leaders, which contained utopian visions of human and spiritual perfection on one end and concrete strategies of race betterment and social reform on the other.

Rosen explores much new terrain in *Preaching Eugenics*. So much so that by the conclusion readers will most likely be left with lingering questions. Some of these require additional research and interpretation by historians of science, medicine, and religion. Other questions, however, result from Rosen’s reluctance to engage fully with themes that are now central to the eugenics literature. For instance, although Rosen illustrates how Jewish leaders vacillated on the concept of “race purity” and the benefits or drawbacks of intermarriage, she teaches us very little about what liberal Protestants and Catholics thought about race and ethnicity in genetic terms or about the potential impact of such thinking on sermonizing or congregational dynamics. The vast majority of liberal Protestants were WASPs, yet Rosen scantily examines how their awareness (or lack thereof) of themselves as a racial group affected which eugenic policies they rejected and endorsed. By not engaging with unspoken ideas about Anglo-Saxon or Nordic superiority, readers will finish *Preaching Eugenics* with little sense of how religion and eugenics worked in tandem (although not always in unison) to underpin the broader patterns of racial segregation and hierarchy in the United States from 1900 to 1930. Readers with minimal familiarity of American history during this period will encounter a national demographic that consists largely of the white middle class, and “new” and “old” immigrants. Perhaps this is the lens

through which many early twentieth-century religious leaders, particularly those on the East Coast, perceived this country and their parishioners. Nevertheless, this circumscribed framing means that the stories of African Americans and immigrants (who were excluded de facto from mainstream eugenics organizations) become irrelevant. Yet the leaders associated with these ethnoraacial groups often relied heavily on churches to sustain their communities and selectively appropriated theories of racial progress from biology and medicine.[1]

Rosen also exhibits a tendency to conflate marriage and reproduction, which makes it difficult for her to gauge the degree to which liberal Protestants’ support of marriage and health certificates was about enforcing religious norms of gender and sexuality or about being able to control the procreation of their parishioners (or both, but this analytical distinction is important). Along similar lines, the role of religious women is never broached in *Preaching Eugenics*, an omission that raises intriguing questions about how male religious leaders constructed their authority on both scientific and spiritual bases.

Rosen breaks new ground in *Preaching Eugenics*. She has written an impressive intellectual and social history of the role of religious leaders affiliated with organized eugenics, above all the AES, from 1900 to the 1940. Beyond illuminating some of the complex intersections between science and religion in an era that saw the emergence of the modern birth control movement, the Scopes Trial, and the papal encyclical *Casta Connubi*, Rosen’s monograph can read as an invitation for further historical studies of religiosity, hereditarianism, and the meanings of morality in modern America.

#### Note

[1]. See Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

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