

# The Evangel of Eugenics

— Preachers for a Better Race in the 1920s —

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## Introduction

In a time when many are looking to genetics for solutions to various health problems, it behooves us to look back at another time when laws of heredity were seen as the solutions for the ills of mankind. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many thought eugenics had some of the answers, if not all. This paper will examine clergy support of the eugenics agenda in the 1920s. Manuscripts submitted for the Eugenics Sermon Contest from the Eugenics Archive will be the primary source materials for this study.

“Praise for the forward march of science. Progressive and liberal leaders championing new scientific techniques that promise to cure disease, eradicate illness

and suffering and advance the progress of the human race. Elite institutions of higher education embarking on their own initiatives, training students and supporting researchers in the new science. California's self-described progressive citizenry passing a law granting state funding and support to the new cause, with other states preparing to follow suit. The intellectual elite of the country decrying the obstructionist, anti-modern views of the people who oppose or publicly challenge the underlying ethical rationale of the new science."<sup>1)</sup>

As Christine Rosen points out the above lines appear to come straight from a current newspaper. The content has all the earmarkings of today's debate about embryonic stem cell research, but it is actually a description of the early twentieth century eugenics debate.

The opening decades of the twentieth century were a period of rapid social and economic change. Some of this change was brought about by technological inventions like steam engines, gasoline engines, airplanes, electric lights and telephones. Migration of significant portions of the rural population to cities, as well as the migration of thousands of former slaves to northern cities, coupled with immigration of millions of poor southern and eastern Europeans put stress on the economy and the political system. Social problems, such as prostitution, alcoholism and poverty, became more prevalent in urban centers. This was the era of labor unions, the women's suffrage movement, prohibition, World War I, economic recession and the emergence of racist and nativist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The early years of the twentieth century saw the rise of a middle class who was feeling threatened by a growing influx of immigrants willing to work for cheaper wages and the emergence of a wealthy class of industrial magnates who were intent on protecting their newly acquired elite status. It was in such a context of social upheaval that many turned to science for solutions for society's problems. Science

was seen as "modern" and "objective" and seemed to offer promises of prosperity and progress.

Enter the "science" of eugenics, founded by Sir Francis Galton, British statistician and cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton was interested in identifying noble traits found in the pedigrees of leading families and encouraging the proliferation of such traits. He postulated that if animals could be improved by breeding, it would also follow that mankind could similarly be improved. In Galton's words, the purpose of eugenics "is to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had."<sup>2)</sup>

### Eugenics and Religion

In his writings, Galton set forth some similarities between eugenics and religion. Mark Haller suggests that "Galton, himself an agnostic, found in eugenics an emotional equivalent for religion. 'An enthusiasm to improve the race is so noble in its aim,' he declared, 'that it might well give rise to the sense of a religious obligation.'<sup>3)</sup> The premise that good qualities, like soundness of body and mind, emotional stability and excellent morals, were generally found in the same persons inspired in eugenicists a faith that the nature of man could indeed be improved. It was a new gospel, offering new hope for the human race. American eugenicists picked up on this connection between eugenics and religious faith. In a letter written

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2) Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, (1883) cited in Garland E. Allen, "Science Misapplied: The Eugenics Age Revisited," *Technology Review*, Vol. 99 (August/September 1996), 22~31.

3) Cited in Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditary Attitudes in American Thought*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 17.

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1) Christine Rosen, "Echoes of Horror," *Dallas Morning News*, April 9, 2005. May, 15, 2005. <[http://www.eppc.org/printVersion/print\\_pub.asp?pubID=2320](http://www.eppc.org/printVersion/print_pub.asp?pubID=2320)>

to Charles Davenport in March of 1912, Irving Fisher asserts that “there is already a sentiment in favor of restricting immigration” and urges that “this is a golden opportunity to get people in general to talk eugenics.” He, too, recognizes that the message of eugenics had a religious quality: “Eugenics can never amount to anything practical until it has begun, as Galton wanted it, to be a popular movement with a certain amount of religious flavor in it.”<sup>4)</sup> Authors of *Applied Eugenics*, Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, were also of the opinion that support should be sought from the religious community: “without abandoning their appeal to reason, eugenicists must make every effort to enlist potent emotional forces on their side. There is none so strong and available as religion, and the eugenicist may turn to it with confidence of finding an effective ally, if he can once gain its sanction.”<sup>5)</sup> Thus eugenics leaders decided to join forces with the religious community.

The American Eugenics Society formed a Committee on Cooperation with the Clergy in 1925. Of three committees formed to garner support from physicians, social workers and clergy, the latter received the lion’s share of the AES budget and had the largest number of members. Although Protestant clergymen were most numerous, a few Jewish rabbis,<sup>6)</sup> and two Catholic priests would also be counted among the members.<sup>7)</sup> Rosen points out that these men “shared a background in and commitment to social reform” and that they had “reputations as outspoken leaders (and occasionally dissenters) in their faiths.”<sup>8)</sup> These clergymen can be characterized, for the most part, as being liberal in their view of Scripture, active in

reform and social gospel, and postmillennial in eschatology. They found much promise in the developments of modern science and attempted to reconcile “the enduring principles of Christianity with the vagaries of modern experience and culture.”<sup>9)</sup> They made adjustments to accommodate evolution and genetic determinism often at the expense of traditional tenets of their faith.

The strategy of the Committee for Cooperation with Clergy which was most successful in getting eugenic message out to a wide audience was that of Sermon Contests—one held in 1926 and one in 1928.<sup>10)</sup> The contest was first announced in some 180 religious and secular newspapers and magazines. The primary requirements were that the manuscript be a sermon that had actually been preached in a church or synagogue on the topic “Religion and Eugenics: Does the church have any responsibility for improving the human stock?”<sup>11)</sup> Historian Daniel Kevles estimates that some 300 sermons were preached in connection with the contest, sixty of which were submitted for judging.<sup>12)</sup> The three top sermons would earn their authors five hundred, three hundred and two hundred dollars, respectively, with another six receiving honorable mention. They were evaluated on the basis of material, plan, style, and message.<sup>13)</sup> Judges for the 1926 contest were Charles

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8) Rosen (2004), 115~119. Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick (Baptist), Bishop William Lawrence (Episcopal), Fr. John M. Cooper (Catholic), and Rabbi Louis Mann (Jewish) were members of the Advisory Council of the AES by 1927. As head of the committee, Rev. Henry Strong Huntington recruited, among others, Rev. Charles Clayton Morrison (Disciples of Christ), Rev. Guy Emery Shipler (Episcopal), Bishop Francis John McConnell (Methodist Episcopal), Rev. S. Parkes Cadman (Methodist), Fr. John M. Cooper (Catholic), David de Sola Pool (Jewish) and Rufus M. Jones (Quaker).

9) *Ibid.*, 15.

10) A third contest was planned for 1930, but lagging membership and insufficient funds appear to have put an end to the contests. See Rosen (2004), 168, 169.

11) *Ibid.*, 120.

12) Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16.

13) O. S. Davis letter to L. Whitney about Davenport’s sermon judging, 1927 [http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=767](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=767)

4) Irving Fisher to Davenport, March 12, 1912, cited in Haller, 144.

5) Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics*, (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 400.

6) For more about the participation of Jewish rabbis in the eugenics program, see Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85~109.

7) For more about Catholic involvement in the American eugenics movement see Rosen (2004), 139~164 and Sharon M. Leon, “Hopelessly Entangled in Nordic Presuppositions”: Catholic Participation in the American Eugenics Society in the 1920s,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 59:1 (January 2004), 3~49.

Davenport, William L. Phelps of Yale University and Osgood S. Davis of the Congregationalist Chicago Theological Seminary. The 1928 contest was judged by H. H. Laughlin, Edmund D. Soper, president of Ohio Wesleyan University and Dallas L. Sharp of Boston University. Although there were a few entries by Jewish rabbis, the entries came largely from mainline Protestant ministers. There is a notable absence of contestants from the Catholic Church.

### Eugenics Sermons

A preliminary look at sermons submitted for the AES contests<sup>14)</sup> shows that the writers realized the necessity of educating their listeners about the nature and content of eugenics. They were aware that some held objections to the eugenics agenda and attempted to counter those objections and correct what they saw as misunderstandings. One writer asserted “most emphatically that eugenics is not

public health, nor sex-hygiene, nor birth-control, nor a plan for killing weaklings, nor a scheme for scientific love-making and for breeding human beings like animals.” Instead, eugenics “seeks first to know the forces of heredity which make men what they are at birth; and then to use these forces to improve the inborn qualities of the race” (#36). Another repudiated the idea that eugenics would engage in “producing supermen or the making of geniuses to order,” but maintained that eugenics desired the “production of a higher degree of intelligence and ability” (#56). Listeners were assured that eugenics “proposes nothing harsh, but believes that it is possible to apply human intelligence to human evolution by such measures as will gradually reduce the number of those who would better never have been born.” In this effort the Christian eugenicist would surely have the “unqualified approval of Jesus” (#36). Science, the “handmaid of Religion” (#56), was commended to their congregations as being rational, innocuous and useful.

Eugenics was also portrayed as an umbrella under which many disciplines could be consolidated and which would provide a comprehensive view of society’s problems. “It is appealing to all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand, . . . declaring that ‘It is only in the laboratory of science that knowledge, morals, religion and the world wisdom of the poet, preacher, sociologist, statesman and philosopher all meet. It is only here that they can all be synthesized into the final great ethic religion of man’” (#56). Eugenics was seen as the hope for the future of the American race.

### Themes

One of the themes that often appeared in sermons submitted in the American Eugenics Society’s sermon contest is an optimistic belief that eugenics could fulfill the dreams for prosperity and progress. This belief was often couched in the rhetoric of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The science of eugenics would bring about “the improvement of the race” (#36) and “the completed Christianization of

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14)The sermons and sermon excerpts used in this study are posted on the Eugenics Archive website. I will list the citation for each one at this point. Further citations will give only the number of sermon.  
 Sermon #2: Eugenics, AES Sermon Contest 1926, #2. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=768](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=768)>  
 Sermon #19 Excerpt, AES Sermon Contest, 1926, #2. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=778](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=778)>  
 Sermon #36 excerpt: “Eugenics,” AES Sermon Contest 1926, #4. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=781](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=781)>  
 Sermon #40 excerpt: “For Our Children’s Sake, the Evangel of Eugenics,” AES Sermon Contest 1926, #4. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=786](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=786)>  
 Sermon #42 excerpt: “Eugenics,” AES Sermon Contest 1926, #5, April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=787](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=787)>  
 Sermon #43 “Religion and Eugenics” circa 1926. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=791](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=791)>  
 Sermon #56: Religion and Eugenics AES Sermon Contest 1927, #6. April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=801](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=801)>  
 Sermon #57 excerpt: “Eugenics,” AES Sermon Contest 1927, #7 April 12, 2005.  
 <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=812](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=812)>

Mankind” (#56). As noted earlier the majority of these clergy held a postmillennial eschatology which envisioned the extension of the Kingdom of God throughout the world that would culminate in the eventual return of Christ to a Christianized world. Technological advances, the wide availability of the Bible in many lands, and increased missionary activity were heralded as evidence of the approach of a golden age in the spiritual, social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind.<sup>15)</sup> One minister queried, “What place has religion in the building of a better world? . . . Religion has to do with the salvation of the individual but also with the salvation of the race. It is a great thing to save a man from sin but it is a bigger thing for a child to be born with clean blood in its veins. It is a big thing to pick a man out of the gutter and clean him up, but it is a bigger thing for than man to have born in him an abhorrence for filth” (#2).

A second recurring theme was a warning about the presence of defectives and their growing threat to society. The “alarming growth” of this “dangerous blood” was perceived in the increase of “criminals, insane and ignorant, immigrants from southern and south-eastern Europe” who were responsible for lowering the average mental age of Americans to a mere 13.8 years. Certain races and classes of people were identified as inferior and unfit. Among these were “Roumanians [*sic*], Bulgarians, Greeks, hybrid Portugese [*sic*], low Italians and other immigrants” (#43).<sup>16)</sup> As proof of the burden that “the delinquent and the defective” put on society, the sermon writer submitted the statistic that 20% of the annual income of the State of New York was spent for their care (#42). Yet another concern was for the “thousands of poor mothers giving up their lives largely to the care of a feeble-

minded child” (#57). Both in the country and in the home for the race to progress, the sermons made it obvious that society must find a way to free itself from the dead weight of the unfit.

Directly related to this problem was the low birthrate of “superior” classes. College graduates were pointed out as a major part of this problem. Unless these families increased the number of their children to four, the country was in danger of being ruled by inferior peoples by the year 2000, because “any man with eyes can see that the old American stock is steadily dying out” (#43). Another minister defined this danger not as “race suicide” (a term used by Theodore Roosevelt and white supremacist Madison Grant), but as “family suicide” or “race deterioration.” He lamented that the offspring of “the healthiest and most gifted families” were being outnumbered by the offspring of “the most handicapped and unhealthy” (#42).

Third is the repeated emphasis that hereditary determines traits. In order to deal with the threat posed by dangerous blood, one minister taught his congregation about “the power of the blood, or, to speak more scientifically, the power of germ-plasm” (#43). He insisted that nature determines a person’s potential; nurture only helps him develop that potential. One entrant proudly cited statistics to illustrate that “the ministry is the profession which has the greatest number of illustrious descendants” (#19). According to them, a whole host of social ills was being passed on from generation to generation through the blood.

The corollary to this belief in hereditary determination, then, is the necessity of choosing a fit mate. Careful selection of one’s mate would be one way to address the problems of society. “Every breeder of horses, cattle, poultry and hogs knows this law perfectly and chooses the males and females very carefully” (#43). One sermon put it this way: “We know that two feeble-minded parents never produce normal children.” The writer attributed “at least three fourths of all the sin and misery in the world. . . to the single fact that the wrong people got married” and drew the conclusion that “only the fit should be allowed to mate” (#36).

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15) See Lorraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism” and “A Postmillennial Response” in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, (Downers Grove, IL: 1977), 117~141, 199~208.

16) Immigration legislation in 1917 inaugurated a literacy test and restricted Asian immigration; in 1921 a 3 percent limit was set and in 1924 limits were set 2 per cent limit based on the 1890 census. See Kevles, 96, 97.

Many of the ministers and rabbis who were enamored with eugenics were also involved in charitable activities in their communities. A final emphasis of the eugenics movement which appears in the sermons is the perceived need for a different concept of charity. “Our whole Christian program of charity tends to undermine heredity,” asserted the preacher. He conceded that “in God’s sight every soul is of inestimable value,” but at the same time cautioned his congregation of the danger that their charitable deeds enabled “the weak—in body and mind—to live and reproduce and thus hand down their misery to generations still unborn” (#40). He bemoaned the fact that well-intentioned philanthropy supplanted the natural order and compounded the very problems they sought to correct. Abandoning a sentimental and indiscriminate altruism for a new objective altruism, based on the “science” of eugenics, would get at the root of the problem and remove the artificial barrier of protection from the genetically inadequate, allowing them to fulfill their true destiny of extinction.

### Use of Scripture

Galton had set the example of invoking Scriptural authority for promoting eugenic ideas. In an article in the *Popular Science Monthly* (1902) he turned to Matthew 25:15~30 to illustrate that, although what is entrusted to each individual is different, each one is responsible in how he uses it. Rosen summarizes the article: “The eugenicist was like the ‘good and faithful servant’ of the parable, who turned his five talents into ten through wise investment; like this servant the eugenicist would improve upon man’s endowment by applying the wisdom of heredity to the talk of reproduction.”<sup>17)</sup> Those who had been entrusted with superior germ plasm were responsible for wisely selecting fit partners and passing on that germ plasm to

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17) Francis Galton, “The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment,” *Popular Science Monthly* 60 (January 1902), 219, cited in Rosen (2004), 6.

following generations.

Following Galton’s lead one sermon writer gave another of Jesus’ parables a eugenic interpretation—that of the good Samaritan. While the biblical good Samaritan dressed the victim’s wounds, took him to an inn, and left money to cover his stay during recovery, a modern good Samaritan with the knowledge of eugenics would “assume new functions.” Rosen outlines these “new functions”: as providing “‘better policing and lighting of the road’ to discourage the thieves who preyed on travelers.” But his role did not stop there; he would also have been “an aggressive promoter of preventive philanthropy.”<sup>18)</sup> A good Samaritan of the twentieth century would do what he could to see that thieves who attacked the man on the road Jericho, as well as others like them, would never have been born.

Not only parables, but the genealogies of Jesus recorded in the early chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke were seen to give evidence of the eugenic content of the Bible. In the words of one preacher, “Christ was born of a family that represented a long process of religious and moral selection. He came from a stock of priestly and prophetic men; a stock of men that represented the highest product of religious and moral selection in the history of the world” (#2). Jesus, despite being in “an environment from which men expected no good thing to come forth,” grew “like a lily” (Isaiah 11:1) and “advanced in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52) (#56). The life of Jesus illustrates the victory of heredity over environment and education.

Jesus’ words to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again” (John 3:3) provide the outline for one of the sermons—the need for physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual rebirth (#56). Eugenics offers the keys to the fourfold development of mankind. Because “man’s body as the temple of the living God” (I Corinthians 6:19), the body, as well as the spirit, needs to be saved (#56).

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Jesus’ betrayer, Judas, is offered as an example of a defective person.

18) *Ibid.*, 123.

According to this preacher, Judas was a “moral weakling” of whom Jesus said: “It were better for that man if he had never been born” (Matthew 26:24). If it were true of Judas in Jesus’ day, it seems obvious that the same could be said of moral weaklings of the early twentieth century. For the good of society it would have been better had they never been born. “And if these millions might be prevented from reproduction so that succeeding generations might appear without their handicaps what a great step would be taken toward the realization of a better order of society of which Jesus dreamed!” (#36). The emotional response that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas calls forth is thus transferred to those with what were considered undesirable traits.

Contestants in the sermon contests did not limit their choice of Scripture texts to the New Testament. No, the eugenic ideal was seen to be present in whole of Scripture. To support the assertion that degenerate traits were passed on from generation to following generations Exodus 20:5, 6 is cited: “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.” One preacher sermonizes on this text: “God is warning most solemnly that the iniquity of the fathers will run in the blood of the coming generations, and is pointing out that terrible law of heredity, so clearly established now by scientists, that blood will tell, that criminality, insanity, idiocy, tuberculosis, alcoholism, and other vices, whose strong corruption inhabits our germ-plasm, leap from parents to children, damning our offspring before it is even born” (#43). He then notes how the “vices of Solomon and Jereboam” were passed on to their sons “until finally the brains and the morals of her kinds rotted and the kings swayed a trembling sceptre over a people steadily degenerating likewise because of inherited vices” (#43).

Another text used to demonstrate that “what a man is now depends upon his

ancestry” is 2 Samuel 17:58: “Whose son art thou, young man?”—the question Saul put to David after he had slain Goliath. According to this minister, when Saul inquires about David’s lineage, he saw “that blood tells powerfully in the life of the individual and the race” (#2). Heroes are not made in a moment; they are a product of heredity.

The eugenicist sought to realize his dream, accomplished by the cooperation of church, home, school and state, “that our sons may be as plants grown up on their youth; that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace” (Psalm 144:12).

#### **Other Source Materials**

Clergy who submitted sermons in the AES contest drew from a wide range of sources for their materials. For example, from Shakespeare’s *Tempest* comes the quote: “There are types like Caliban of whom Prosper said, ‘A devil, a born devil, on whose nature, nurture will never stick’” (#2). A couple of lines from British poet William Ernest Henley’s poem “Invictus” is also invoked by several to urge listeners to take responsibility for their descendants by choosing their marriage partners judiciously: “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul” (#56). A stanza of Tennyson’s poetry also appears in one of the sermons (#42).

In addition to such literary allusions, a number of aphorisms that would be familiar to the audience also appear in the sermons. One in particular appears almost like a refrain: “Blood will tell” or the related expression “Brains will tell.” Others called into service include: “There is as much in the blood of a man as in the blood of a horse” (#19); “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear” (#2); “Prevention is better than cure and cure is often impossible” (#2); “It is fine to have a family tree if it isnt [*sic*] too shady” (#2); and “To be forewarned is to be forearmed” (#56). All of these emphasize the idea of genetic determinism and stress the importance of good breeding.

Eugenicists and their writings were also a frequently consulted source. One of the most widely read eugenics books of the time was Albert Wiggam’s best-seller, *The New Decalogue of Science* (1922), so it is not unusual that allusions to it should appear in the sermons.<sup>19)</sup> One contestant quoted the popular author and lecturer saying: “had Jesus been among us, He would have been president of the first Eugenic Congress.” Wiggam had replaced Jesus’ Golden Rule with the “Biological Golden Rule, The Completed Golden Rule of Science – ‘Do unto the born and the unborn as you would have both the born and the unborn do unto you’” (#56), illustrating the “final reconciliation of science and the Bible.” Additionally, one of Wiggam’s anecdotes about a gun-shy pup was used to prove that “Hereditry alone can affect capacity.” The mother of the pup was afraid of gun shots. She was bred with a fine hunting dog, but the pup, like its mother, was of no use when taken on a hunt. The conclusion is foregone—one cannot overcome one’s heredity.

The research of eugenicist Charles Davenport is also cited as showing that “our physical traits, good and bad, and our diseases run in families and are determined by blood, or to speak technically, by the germ-plasm.” Offered as a case in point is the settlement of America by the Pilgrim fathers and the settlement of Sidney, Australia by “jail-birds from England” (#43; see also #2). Sydney is maligned for its large slums, the existence of which is attributed to criminals deported there from England. In contrast, the preacher gives a long list of political and cultural leaders who descended from the British who arrived on the *Mayflower* and contributed to making America a world leader.

Another often-quoted eugenic source was Richard L. Dugdale’s *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (1877).<sup>20)</sup> Family pedigree studies, including the families of Max Jukes, Martin Kallikak and Richard Edwards

mentioned in several sermons,<sup>21)</sup> were used to give credence to the idea that criminal and antisocial behavior—or as in the case of the Edwards, noble traits—were genetically predisposed. Dugdale himself did not conclude that heredity was the primary contributory factor, but eugenicists heralded his study as definitive proof that degenerate traits were passed on within families.<sup>22)</sup>

Sermon writers also looked to other scientific studies to give weight to their arguments. One preacher cited statistical research of Raymond Pearl, professor of biometry and statistics at John Hopkins, in support of birth control to address the problem of overpopulation (#43). Another credited Karl Pearson, biometrician who held the first University of London’s Galton Chair of Eugenics, with population statistics that were purported to “show high, positive correlations between large families and dirty houses, poor food, and low wages.” The minister was willing to concede that accidents or illness might be responsible for an impoverished condition, but with “people of good stock” it would only be temporary. On the other hand, “those of shiftless habits, dull mentality and little ambition” would be caught in a “self-perpetuating” condition of poverty (#42).

Sermon #42 also brings up the problems associated with population growth and

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20) See Kevles, 71 and Haller, 21~22. For a discussion of the use of the Kallikak family, see Rosen (2004), 25~52.

21) See sermons #2, #19, #36, #43 and #56.

22) Dugdale’s seven-generation genealogy study was based on inmates at the Ulster County jail. He posited that the Jukes family had cost taxpayers a large amount of money. A subsequent update of the study by Eugenics Record Office field worker Arthur H. Estabrook in 1915 was, like Dugdale’s, faulty in methodology and use of sources. Information from the archives at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and records from an Ulster county poorhouse discovered in 2001 provide evidence that many family members gave no evidence of criminality and that no few members were upstanding citizens of Ulster County. Elof Axel Carlson, professor of biochemistry and cell biology at the State University of New York, said of the Jukes case, “In fact, they were not biologically flawed and doomed—they were simply poor scapegoats.” Cited in Scott Christianson, “Bad Seed or Bad Science: The Story of the Notorious Jukes Family,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2003, B9. May, 13, 2005. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/08/arts/08\\_JUKE.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/08/arts/08_JUKE.html)>

19) Not all references to Wiggam’s book are credited to him. For example, the list of what eugenics is not, which appeared in an earlier section, is an almost word-for-word quote. Many of the other eugenicists and scientists referred to in the sermons are also found in Wiggam’s book.

the high birth rate of people of lower intelligence. “The present tendency is toward a terrific increase and congestion of population.” Biologist E. M. East’s *Mankind at the Crossroads* (1923) is identified as the source for his information. According to Haller, East “painted a grim picture of mankind soon to face war and starvation by outrunning the supply of food and rapidly degenerating because of reproduction by the incompetent.” At this crossroads “mankind had a choice between the road to ruin or the road to continued progress.”<sup>23)</sup> Unlike East, who advocated lowering the birthrate of all classes, the sermon writer follows the eugenics “party line” of the necessity of decreasing the birthrate of degenerates and increasing the offspring of the fit.

Other people who were cited include Horace Bushnell, author of bestselling *Christian Nurture* (1861) (#56); Benjamin Franklin (#2)<sup>24)</sup>; Gregor Mendel (#36); Professor Johnson, author of *Applied Eugenics* (#43); Professors William James of Harvard and Ladd of Yale (#19); Chicago judges Harry Olson and Dr. William J. Hickson, who had done a study of the cases of 40,000 criminals (#19); the philosopher Schiller (#56)<sup>25)</sup> and Rev. Henry Ward Beecher (#2). Antebellum minister of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, Beecher, is recorded as having advised his successor, Newell Dwight Hillis, to check out the horses of his congregation first: “If they have fine, spick and span horses, these people have high ideals and you can do them a lot of good. But if they have poor, broken-down, half-starved, low-bred horses, get out of there. You can’t save these peoples’ souls because they have no souls to save” (#2).

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23) Haller, 167.

24) In Benjamin Franklin’s day, the number of children of college graduates was eight as compared to less than two at that time.

25) The Schiller referred to is most likely F. C. S. Schiller, pragmatist philosopher and author of *A Scientific and Social Problem* (1912) and *Tantalus or the Future of Man* (1924). The latter offers the example of Tantalus of Greek mythology as a defense of social eugenics and sets forth the argument that when science and civilization assist the weak, the future of the human race is threatened.

### Proposed Solutions

One sermon delineated a three-point plan which would offer hope to the generations to come. First on his agenda is becoming better informed—a role that church, home and schools should fill. He and his audience should know more “about the way individual traits perpetuate themselves through heredity, and about the way to encourage a higher birth-rate among those classes of our people who have carried our best blood and have furnished us our leaders in the past.” Knowledge of important facts should help “find some way to cherish forever in America the blood of the Pilgrim fathers” (#56). Another minister noted that universities, the Carnegie Institute, and the American Eugenics Society were working to provide the necessary information. He reported that courses in eugenics education which covered “laws of heredity, dominant and recessive traits” were being “devoured” by university and college students (#43).<sup>26)</sup>

But new information is not all that is needed. One must also pass on to young people what one already knows about the sacredness of marriage. He notes that Catholics and Mormons do a better job than they in this area. Young people need to be taught that wealth is not measured by expensive clothes or cars, but by the children one has. They should be taught to “desire marriage more than gayety” and to avoid marriage with cousins, “criminals and weak-minded” (#56). The importance of “courses on parenthood and home building” for “the reproduction of the race, a race well born and better born than those of past generations” was noted (#43). The failure of parents to instruct their children “concerning the mysteries and the functions of life” is denounced as a sin (#56). Another stated that priorities needed to be set on “the production of strong, healthy children,” rather than

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26) Haller reports that eugenics courses were being taught at universities such as Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Brown, Wisconsin, Northwestern and Clark by 1914 (72). For a discussion of eugenics education and textbooks see Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 48~83.

“baseball, horse-racing, and the movies” (#2). They gave a call to get back to the basics and to ensure their children and their children’s children would have a strong foundation on those basics.

Although it was acknowledged that “laws do not change the hearts of man,” passing laws was the third recommended action. Legislation to sterilize, or at least segregate, “idiots and criminals”<sup>27)</sup> and legislation to reinstate the practice of publishing bans in advance of the wedding is recommended to insure that “people shall enter marriage solemnly” (#43).<sup>28)</sup> He was not alone in recommending that the state should become involved in protecting the institution of marriage. Another proposes that the government “should demand a single standard of social purity and health certificates for marriage mates.” He proposes that the government should provide information about “birth control to the poor and to the illiterate.”<sup>29)</sup> He goes so far as to suggest that the state “should establish bureaus of information concerning

family pedigrees and the results of crossing one stream of germ plasm with another” for the purpose of helping young people choose their marriage partners “intelligently” (#56).

The sanction for sterilization found its basis in the laws of the state which were, in turn, derived from the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses. Murder, theft, and adultery are all prohibited and punished by the government. The sermon writer posits: “Is it not also within the province of the state to say to moral lepers, to the feeble-minded, to the hardest criminals, to the physically unfit ‘Thou shalt not reproduce thy kind’?” Anticipating the disapproval of sterilization of “moral and mental and physical defectives” as “inhuman and unjust,” he asserts that from the perspective of the “scientist and biologist it is the most beneficent and human thing that the State can do for the wellbeing of society and for the realization of the Kingdom of God upon earth” (#56).

## Conclusion

The sermon contestants exhibited an enthusiasm for eugenics, the “bright star in a world’s dark night” that “has arisen to dispel the darkness and the gloom, to push back out horizons and give us a new and enlarged perspective of a progressive civilization” (#56). Rallying under the banner of eugenics, these clergymen accepted the challenge to spread the message and became willing propagandists for the cause. Bozeman notes that “eugenics provided a worldview in which the value of anything—be it a physical object, a social structure, a philosophy, or an individual—could be determined according to the degree to which it furthered the cause of the race, primarily through enhancement of society’s gene pool.”<sup>30)</sup> Accepting this worldview sacrificed the traditional belief in the free will of man to

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27) Indiana passed the first sterilization law in 1907. In the next ten years, fifteen more states had enacted similar laws. Those targeted by these laws were criminals, epileptics, insane and feeble-minded. See Kevles, 100 ff.

28) Walter Taylor Sumner, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Chicago was the pioneer in regulating marriage in his parish. An editorial from *The Medical Times, New York*, entitled “Man of the Moment,” describes Sumner’s policy. “Recognizing that matrimony as at present permitted allows defectives to bring their own kind into the world and then fill our prisons, insane and epileptic hospital and pauper asylums, he has stepped into the breach and proclaimed in clarion tones that henceforth no one shall be married in his Church unless mentally and physically sound and presents a certificate from a reputable physician that they have no incurable or communicable disease....His name will always be associated with Eugenics in this country for his determination to regulate marriage in his own parish has given the science an impetus that all good men will endeavor to assist.” Quoted in “Dean Sumner,” Redpath Chautauqua lecture pamphlet, (191?). May 5, 2005. <<http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=sumner/1>> See also Rosen (2004), 69 ~ 75.

29) Margaret Sanger opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn in 1916, but it was not until the organization of the American Birth Control League in 1921 that the birth control movement garnered public attention. Eugenicists were skeptical and at first distanced themselves from Sanger’s activities. By 1928 support had grown within the AES and birth control was added to the eugenics agenda.

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30) John M. Bozeman, “Eugenics and Clergy in the Early Twentieth-Century United States,” *Journal of American Culture*, 27:4 (December 2004), 423.

genetic determinism and the freedom of the individual to the good of the gene pool. Acceptance of the evolutionary roots of eugenics, which were abhorrent to evangelicals and conservatives, opened the way for these preachers to rethink the traditional religious positions on the sanctity of life, moral responsibility, and charity.

The sermons themselves are not particularly creative; they use similar illustrations, Scripture texts and sources. Davenport, in a letter to Leon Whitney, acknowledged that he “found the work of judging very difficult because of the entire absence of quantitative criteria. No measurements possible.”<sup>31)</sup> Sharp also comments on the sermons: “The lack of originality both in matter and in manner is rather appalling.”<sup>32)</sup> There is little exegesis of the Biblical passages used in the sermons. Instead, there are many instances where phrases are removed from their original context and utilized as proof texts to give a semblance of authority to eugenic ideas. The Bible is just one of many sources cited to support their content.

The experts quoted and sources cited reflect the pseudo-biological rationale of eugenics. Eugenics espoused an ideal of racial purity, which implied desirable and undesirable traits. The conclusions drawn by these ministers about what should be done to save the “American race” were based on flawed intelligence tests and faulty pedigree studies. When facing serious social problems, they seem to find any proof acceptable, especially when the proposed solutions do not restrict their own freedoms and nor threaten their own social status. On the other hand, they were quite willing to restrict the freedom to propagate or the freedom to enter the country when it was deemed to be in the best interests of society. They had found a scientific basis for their prejudice. They focused on the social eugenics message rather than the scientific details.

The appeal of eugenics to the religious community can be positively seen as a

31) Charles Davenport’s letter to Leon Whitney, February 17, 1927 about judging sermons. April 15, 2005. <[http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image\\_header.pl?id=766](http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=766)>.

32) Dallas L. Sharp, letter to H. S. Huntington, September 14, 1928, cited in John M. Bozeman, 425.

product of a vision of a transformed world, the dream of a universal and everlasting kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness. Likewise it can be viewed as an outgrowth of a concern for burgeoning social problems and the frustration of fighting a seemingly losing battle. Negatively seen, their support grew out of a sense of superiority, bigotry and pride. As Donald Pickens notes “Galtonian eugenics was merely the projection and class bias of the upper class.”<sup>33)</sup>

The eugenics umbrella was large and accommodated a wide range of causes and opinions. Thanks to this ambiguity, eugenics gathered supporters from various camps. The movement was interpreted to mean pretty much whatever one wanted it to mean. The understanding of the workings of genetics was simplistic and shows an inability to grasp the complexity of the interaction of genes and the great range of possibilities of those interactions. But they were convinced that science could alleviate human misery and they ridiculed those who rejected eugenics, calling them old-fashioned or religiously intolerant.

Eugenics flourished in a time of economic downturn, societal dislocation and national fear—an era that has similarities with today’s society. The present-day debate concerning stem cell research is in many aspects very different from the eugenics debate of the early twentieth century, but its propaganda methods and language are similar. If one is to believe the proponents of stem cell research, opposition is delaying the development of cures for such diseases as Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, and Parkinson’s, as well as providing help for injuries such as full body burns and spinal cord injuries. The suffering of such people as a former president, a popular movie star, and a governor’s wife, lend a sense of poignancy and urgency to the debate. The need to avoid overstated claims of the ability of science to solve societal problems exists today as it did in the heyday of eugenics. Political correctness may have neutralized much of the racial bias of

33) Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and Progressives*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 205.

1920s eugenics, but a distinction between desirable and undesirable traits still exists. The question of who can make the decisions about whose rights will be protected and whose can be sacrificed for the good of society—or at least some members of the society—requires attention. The danger of hubris which begins under the name of science and progress should be acknowledged. The example of preachers in the 1920s illustrates the difficulties of being well informed, struggling with hard ethical issues and facing one’s own prejudices.

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