

Beyond Birth Control: Catholic Responses to the Eugenics Movement in the United States, 1900-1950

Abstract: At its heart, the eugenics movement was an attempt on the part of scientists and reformers to shape the American population by regulating the ability of particular persons to reproduce. The social ideology that undergirded the eugenics movement directly contradicted Roman Catholic teaching about marriage and the family. This dissertation explores the ways in which, during the period between 1900 and 1950, U.S. Roman Catholics responded to the eugenics movement. Focusing on Catholic responses to eugenics allows us to more fully investigate Catholic understandings of reproductive politics, gender roles, family, and racial difference. This dissertation challenges conventional scholarly understandings of the eugenics movement, nationalism, citizenship, and Catholic politics, while deepening our understanding of the adjustment of Catholicism to American conditions.

Background: The effort of eugenics advocates to control the reproductive habits of the American population during the first half of the twentieth century brought them into direct conflict with U.S. Catholics who adhered to the traditional teaching of the church on marriage and family life. Differentiating between biologically *superior* and *inferior* individuals, eugenics advocates fought for public policy measures such as sterilization, sexual segregation, anti-miscegenation statutes, and immigration restriction to discourage the reproduction of the *inferior*—new immigrants, the mentally ill, the impoverished, and those with substance abuse problems. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII declared in *Rerum Novarum* that the family was “the ‘society’ of a man’s house ... anterior to every kind of state or nation, invested with rights and duties of its own, totally independent of the civil community.”¹ Eugenic policy initiatives threatened to violate the sanctity of the sacramental marriage bond by allowing scientists and other reformers to use their vision of proper family life, citizenship and national progress to pass judgment on who deserved to be allowed to reproduce. Drawing on the existing scholarship on U.S. Catholicism, race and ethnicity, the history of science, and family and women’s history my dissertation is the first to ask how and why Catholics in the United States were the major critics of eugenics ideology outside of the academic scientific community.

The unfolding of this narrative allows me to engage four key conversations about the American social and cultural climate in the first half of the twentieth century. First, following the example of more recent Catholic history, such as Dorothy Brown and Elizabeth McKeown’s *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*, this project addresses the engagement of Catholics with American social structures and institutions, examining the ways that they influence one another. Second, I engage the stance of historians of science, such as Daniel Kevles and Elazar Barkan, who treat eugenics as primarily a conflict between biologists and anthropologists over what constitutes good science. Expanding the dominant narrative, this study transforms the history of eugenics from a one-dimensional scientific debate into a multifaceted story by restoring ethnically, religiously and socio-economically heterogeneous voices of opposition. As the single largest religious denomination in the United States during this period, the Catholic Church in America was characterized by a remarkable amount of ethnic diversity, with over 75% of the approximate 15.8 million U.S. Catholics in 1916 as first or second generation immigrants, most of whom were members of the unskilled working classes.²

¹ Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum” in *The Papal Encyclicals in Their Historical Context*, edited by Anne Fremantle (New York: Mentor Books, 1956) 171-172.

² Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 135, 156-7.

These ethnic and economic factors made Catholics prime targets for eugenicists who associated hereditary degeneracy with new immigrants and the impoverished. Third, I enter into conversation with feminist scholars such as Linda Gordon, Elaine Tyler May, and Molly Ladd Taylor, who have rightly analyzed eugenics as a source of anti-feminist rhetoric and gendered social control. However, these scholars have not adequately acknowledged the degree to which early twentieth century feminists adopted the eugenics cause as a way to reinforce their cultural power. These accounts also have not paid significant attention to those individuals and organizations that resisted eugenics ideology. Such oversights both suggest that the actors in early debates about reproductive rights resist easy categorization as either liberal or conservative thinkers, and call for a reconsideration of early feminist politics. Finally, I draw on and extend the vast literature on racial and ethnic identity formation while considering how Catholicism helped to shape that process and attendant attitudes about reproductive politics.

Objectives: In the course of telling the complicated story of Catholic responses to the eugenics movement, this research seeks to reconsider the traditional understandings of progressive politics, early feminism, and U.S. Catholic engagement with social policy. Treating eugenics philosophy and initiatives as part of a larger social ideology of racial, class, and gender domination, my dissertation will argue that scholars of American culture need to carefully consider the role of religion and science in shaping conversations about race, ethnicity and reproductive politics.

Design & Methodology: Organized into five chapters, my dissertation makes use of a wide variety of sources including archival material from the National Catholic Welfare Council, the American Eugenics Society, and the American Society for Voluntary Sterilization, papers from prominent Catholic social thinkers and eugenicists, Catholic periodical sources, courts cases on both the state and federal level, and a variety of popular eugenics publications. Also, I investigate battles over eugenics policy initiatives at the state and diocesan level to more sharply reveal the differences among the Catholic population. I examine these sources through the lens of social and intellectual history, as well as contemporary work on nationalism and cultural hegemony.

The majority of this study springs forth from an understanding of the dialogic process of cultural adaptation that shaped both the Catholic community and the larger dominant American culture during the first half of the twentieth century. The first chapter of this project situates the story of Catholic responses to the eugenics movement within both the global context of Catholic social teaching and the specific national context of the United States, drawing on the papal teachings and providing the background narrative necessary to understand the emerging national presence of the church through the formation of the National Catholic Welfare Council. Chapter II examines the ways in which Catholic responses to eugenics policy initiatives concretely influenced the American legislative and judicial process on a state and federal level. Throughout the late 1920s both the NCWC and local diocesan officials opposed compulsory sterilization laws, culminating in a failed attempt to get a rehearing of the landmark *Buck v. Bell* case before the Supreme Court. In 1930 Pius XI issued his encyclical condemning eugenic sterilization and birth control. Chapter III emphasizes the fact that during the period before *Casti Connubii*, Catholics mobilized the rhetoric of both scientific veracity and the American political tradition to bolster their opposition to many eugenic policies. This chapter deals with the period in the late 1920s when, in a clear effort to reinforce their cultural power, eugenicists attempted to recruit Catholic supporters for their policies, engaging them in conversation about charity, immigration, birth control, feminism, and sterilization. Chapter IV deals with the period after the encyclical when Catholics proceeded with confidence in their opposition to sterilization, attacking eugenics

and sterilization on the national and local level. Even as the organized eugenics movement began to wane in the late 1930s, Catholic social scientists and theologians continued to engage eugenics advocates in public debate—public debate that proves instructive about Catholic attitudes toward race and reproduction in an overall nationalist context. Finally, Chapter V addresses the lingering questions of race and reproduction that continued to arise in the 1940s as eugenicists promoted sterilization, marriage licenses, and anti-miscegenation legislation.

Potential significance: By examining Catholic responses to the eugenics movement, my dissertation project makes important contributions to a number of fields. For instance, it provides an overdue corrective to the typical narratives about eugenics debates as scientific endeavors and the involvement of early feminists with the movement. Studying Catholic efforts to stop policies such as compulsory sterilization of the feeble-minded, this project makes clear that a variety of non-scientists engaged in these discussions. This realization allows for a reconsideration of early feminism and Catholic teaching on women's roles and reproduction, replacing the eugenics debate along side other conversations about the reproductive politics surrounding birth control and abortion. Similarly, this project sheds light on the process of racial and ethnic identity formation by arguing that religious faith and teachings play a significant role in producing and reproducing cultural notions of racial difference.

Recognizing the importance of Catholic responses to eugenics not only transforms the history of eugenics, feminist politics, and racial and ethnic formation, but also the scholarly understanding of Catholicism in the United States because it provides a site for examining the ways in which Catholics engaged in a selective process of americanization that shaped both U.S. Catholicism and the larger American society. Taking note of this reciprocal interaction, this project illuminates the ways in which religion has the potential to provide its adherents with powerful narrative alternatives to dominant Anglo-Protestant imaginings, thus contributing in significant ways to the ongoing struggle to shape American culture.

Key references: Barkan, Elazar, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (1992); Brown, Dorothy and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (1997); Gordon, Linda, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* (1990); Jacobson, Matthew Frye, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race* (1998); Kevles, Daniel J., *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1985); May, Elaine Tyler, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (1995); McGreevy, John T., *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (1995); Roediger, David R., *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991).