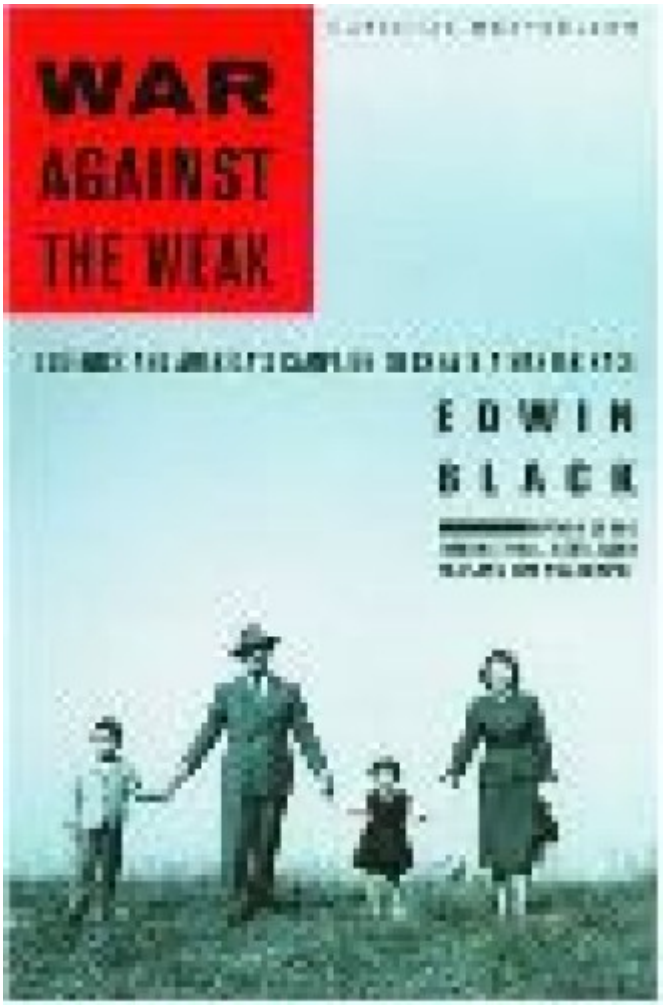
Good breeding

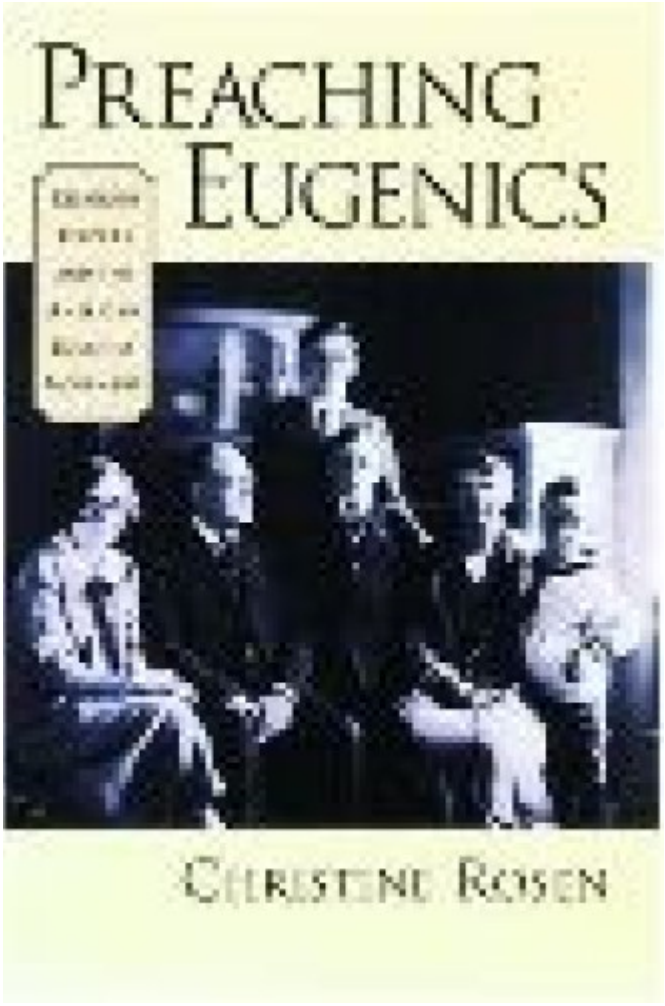
By Amy Laura Hall in the November 2, 2004 issue

In Review



War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race

Edwin Black
Four Walls Eight Windows



Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement

Christine Rosen
Oxford University Press

In the early 1920s progressive high schools and YMCAs took part in the Keeping Fit Campaign. The caption on one Keeping Fit poster asked: “What Kind of Children?” and went on to explain: “Children get their basic qualities by inheritance. If they are to be strong, keen, efficient and great, there must be good blood back of them.” Youth were to consider not only the “good blood” of a future mate but also that of his or her extended family. This propaganda was meant to correct what Margaret Sanger in 1922 termed “unthinking and indiscriminate fecundity.”

How many children people should have, and how parents (and society) can ensure that only genetically fit children are born, have been enduring questions in American

culture. Both quantity and quality count when attempting to form the kind of children who will contribute to a more perfect union. The quest for “strong, keen, efficient and great” offspring came to the fore during the past century, when the dominant classes became concerned with making fecundity discriminating.

Christine Rosen examines the role of religion in the pursuit of efficient reproduction. Her book’s cover features a photograph of the winner of the Fitter Family Contest, sponsored by the Eastern States Exposition of 1925. The two oldest boys stand together with winsome smiles. The daughter, sporting a modern bob and practical spectacles, sits next to the father, who gazes at his youngest child, a little boy in a sailor suit. The serenely smiling mother is substantially built.

This progressive New England family is headed by Kenneth C. MacArthur, pastor of the Federated Church in Sterling Massachusetts, lecturer at Andover Newton Seminary, advocate for the Social Gospel, and spokesman for the American Eugenics Society. The MacArthur family portrait personifies wholesomeness and modernity. In an award-winning sermon on eugenics, MacArthur asserts that decent Christians have a responsibility to use “every help which science affords” to prevent the “feebleminded and wrong-willed” from “pouring their corrupt currents into the race stream.”

MacArthur’s enthusiasm for eugenics was no anomaly. It was shared by Harry F. Ward, professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary from 1918 to 1941 and founder of the Methodist Federation for Social Service (1907), who in his article “Is Christian Morality Harmful, Over-Charitable to the Unfit?” (1928) encouraged Christians to help remove “the causes that produce the weak.” Walter Taylor Sumner, dean of the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Chicago from 1906 to 1915, instituted in 1912 his own system of inspection for prospective couples to ensure that they were “normal physically and mentally.” John Haynes Holmes, Unitarian minister of New York’s Church of the Messiah, concurred (in 1913), encouraging his fellow members of the Liberal Ministers’ Association of New York “to perform nothing but health marriages.”

The best and the brightest of progressive Protestantism in the first half of the 20th century were zealous allies in the effort to encourage fitter families and to discourage the birth of those who would be a burden on the rest. Charitable Christian organizations, facing large numbers of poor, immigrant families and increasing crime rates in the nation’s cities, turned to the new science of heredity to

craft a more manageable, wholesome future.

Church leaders' efforts to attack the scourge of degeneracy, feeblemindedness and poverty ran parallel to and often joined forces with the work of the American Eugenics Society. Led by Charles Davenport (son of a New York Congregationalist minister) and funded by Andrew Carnegie, the AES sponsored contests for sermons on "better breeding," held Fitter Family competitions, and encouraged local efforts to sterilize the unfit. The movement promulgated a distinction between "grade A" individuals, who should be encouraged to procreate, and variously unfit people, who should be actively discouraged or disabled from passing on their genetic heritage. It promoted eugenic responsibility as a personal, religious and civic matter, something to be addressed in the home, parish and courthouse. A customary sign at rural fairs across the country asked, "How long are we Americans to be so careful for the pedigree of our pigs and chickens and cattle—and then leave the ancestry of our children to chance, or to 'blind' sentiment?" This propaganda collapsed physical, mental and social signs of "deviance." Illiteracy, extraneous toes, childbirth out of wedlock and a record of theft all went into the mix to determine whether an individual, couple or family group were genetically fit.

Why did mainline Protestants find this movement so compelling? A charitable interpretation is that they simply wanted to reduce human suffering. Perceiving a stark and growing contrast between respectable middle-class families and the "teeming broods" of new immigrants in the urban centers, progressive leaders turned to eugenic science to control what seemed the otherwise uncontrollable plight of the poor.

But another reading seems equally plausible—that many sought to shore up their status as part of the "responsible middle-class" by underscoring the discrepancy between their own "fit" families and those of the underclass. Whatever the motives, mainline Protestants lent their influence to an arsenal of coercion described in painstaking detail in Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak*.

After he finished his controversial *IBM and the Holocaust*: *The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America's Most Powerful Corporation* (now the subject of international litigation), Black put his research team to work tracing the web of eugenics in the U.S. and abroad. *War Against the Weak* relates how many groups with prominent board members from the fields of religion, business and government pushed for state laws to sterilize both people on public assistance and those thought

likely to breed children who would become wards of the state.

Their efforts were effective. North Carolina sterilized thousands of people before the program ended in 1974; historian Paul Lombardo estimates that Virginia sterilized at least 8,000. By 1940 more than 35,000 people from across the country had been sterilized or castrated, the majority in the preceding two decades. (Black's first chapter features a brief but powerful interview with one Virginia victim.)

According to Black, two women played crucial roles in the "war against the weak." The grand dame of eugenics was millionaire-widow Mrs. E. H. Harriman. Her aim was clear: to stem the tide of the "defective and delinquent classes." Her motive was fairly transparent: to secure the superiority of wealth.

A different motive fueled the efforts of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood. She was drawn to eugenics through her nursing work in the slums of lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, where "the oppressive reality of overpopulation and poverty cried out for relief." She viewed the suffering of the urban poor in apocalyptic terms and vowed to usher in a different realm.

As Black relates, Sanger subsequently "embraced the Malthusian notion that a world running out of food supplies should halt charitable works and allow the weak to die off." In her book *Pivot of Civilization* (1922), Sanger addresses "the cruelty of charity," arguing against the "sinisterly fertile soil" that perpetuates "defectives, delinquents and dependents." Charity "encourages the healthier and more normal sections of the world to shoulder the burden of unthinking and indiscriminate fecundity of others; which brings with it . . . a dead weight of human waste."

Even after World War II, Sanger continued to argue for the sterilization of those on public assistance. "Let us not forget that these billions, millions, thousands of people are increasing, expanding, exploding at a terrific rate every year. Africa, Asia, South America are made up of more than a billion human beings," she admonishes.

Black's book displays the vast scope of the eugenic project in America. From "child welfare, prison reform, better education, human hygiene, clinical psychology, medical treatment, world peace and immigrant rights, as well as charities and progressive undertakings of all kinds," eugenics became as American as apple pie. Much as the double helix now shapes our imaginations, the idea that there are good genes that should be promoted and bad genes to be jettisoned made its way into everything from Nancy Drew mysteries to the *Ladies' Home Journal* to the

Intercollegian, the YMCA's magazine.

In an issue of the *Intercollegian* as late as 1948, Paul Popenoe, author of the widely used textbook *Applied Eugenics*, warns readers that "too large a proportion" of children are "born in homes which can give them the worst start in every way." He explains that "the family which sends a child to the University of California averages two living children," whereas "the family which sends a child to the Sonoma State home for the feebleminded averages five living children." The follow-up article by psychologist Helen F. Southard, "Planning Parenthood on Campus," concludes that "the Christian asks: how many; how healthy?"

The overt racism of these campaigns is no longer acceptable in today's civic square or in mainline Protestant pulpits, but the impetus toward eugenics remains. Controlling the reproduction of the social body and individual bodies, controlling the quality and quantity of the next generation in order to form a more perfect union—these impulses remain part of American culture.

Consider the "Genomic Revolution" exhibit sponsored by pharmaceutical companies and the American Museum of Natural History, an exhibit based on an infinitely more exact science than the half-lies, untruths and sheer conjectures of old-fangled eugenicists. Addressing the fear that genetic science will lead to racial and ethnic discrimination, the exhibit tells us that "we share 99.9 percent of our genes with each other" and that "we are all the same in a way, for we all have DNA."

But who, one wonders, are the we to whom the "all the same" refers? Are we still "all the same" if one in our midst has a genetic disease? Midway through the exhibit is a section on "Getting the Right Tests," featuring a mother holding her smiling, blond boy on her lap. She warns viewers to demand every prenatal test available. The message is clear: she would have terminated her pregnancy had tests shown her son to have a debilitating genetic condition.

A similarly mixed message about human unity and difference recently appeared on the Web site of the eugenics archive at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (home of the leading geneticist James Watson). Marking the 75th anniversary of the infamous *Buck v*. *Bell* case endorsing forced sterilization, in which Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. declared "three generations of imbeciles is enough," the laboratory assures us that the new, more precise science of genetics means that "no human lineage is without hope." The feature allows one to view the grade "A" report card of the little girl

Holmes had declared an imbecile, and optimistically concludes that “one can never predict where genius will arise.”

This rendition of the new genetics begs the basic question of eugenics: What if baby Buck had flunked out of kindergarten and every subsequent grade? What if she had eventually given birth out of wedlock? Would that have proven Holmes correct? Was it wrong to sterilize Carrie Buck only because, as it turned out, her child was not an “imbecile”? Was the old eugenics wrong simply because it was scientifically inaccurate? Was it wrong because it was state- coerced rather than freely chosen? Or was it wrong for a more fundamental reason, one that also implicates the new eugenics: because eugenics seeks fundamentally to locate a human being on a grid of calculable worth?

Similar assumptions lie behind the now ubiquitous question “How many?” Sanger’s powerfully charged distinction between prudent and imprudent fecundity has grown to influence policies on everything from immigration to public schools. Technological birth control need not have emerged in the way it did in the U.S. History might have told a different story, wherein families and cultures were able to choose life in multiple, even seemingly profligate, ways and find support for their choices in the civic and international sphere. But the science of reproductive control grew in the soil of eugenics, and mainstream assumptions about birth control still reflect strong judgements about the number of children responsible parents should have.

The New Yorker Book of Kids’ Cartoons (2001) features only three cartoons with families of more than two children—one a family of fish, another of cats, and a third an obviously poor, white, working-class family. (The mother announces to the lunch box–toting father, “Boy, did I have an afternoon. The census man was here.”) The same attitude is apparent in Monty Python’s classic “every sperm is sacred” segment in *The Meaning of* Life. As John Cleese sings to a house full of children about Catholicism’s unconditional acceptance, modern viewers are encouraged to guffaw. “And the one thing they say about Catholics is: They’ll take you as soon as you’re warm. You don’t have to be a six-footer. You don't have to have a great brain.”

The specter of the unplanned child, born to be a burden on the social body, is still a powerful tool in the propaganda of cultural assimilation. A current effort to prevent teen pregnancy makes the “Keeping Fit” campaign seem subtle. Pictures posted in high schools and featured in teen magazines show a Latina girl with “CHEAP”

emblazoned across her body. The African-American girl is labeled “REJECT,” the Asian girl “DIRTY” and the working-class white girl “NOBODY.” The posters use brute shame to bring females from four subcultures into conformity on the question of teen pregnancy. The small print advocates condom use, but the advertisements all too effectively present the judgment that some mothers are cheap, dirty nobodies, social rejects with no future, and that there is little hope for their illegitimate children. What has made our culture set the stakes of teen pregnancy so high as to warrant this kind of ideological firepower?

To raise questions about the control of reproduction is to threaten the longstanding concerns of feminists and environmentalists who worry, in the first case, about who should control procreation and, in the second, about how much procreation creation can sustain. But even feminists and environmentalists (and I consider myself to be in both camps) must face the ways that reproductive technologies have assumed and contribute to a contingent life ethic. Control over what kind of children should be born when has fostered the idea that citizens can and should judge between auspicious and burdensome life and auspicious and burdensome families. With new biotechnological tools emerging daily, many people deem parents personally and socially responsible for the results of their choosing to bear children. Parents may soon be left to their own devices if they have children who require extra time and social spending.

The Roman Catholic case against the technological timing and mechanization of reproduction draws on a certain understanding of the nature of marital intimacy. Protestants may make this case against eugenics by emphasizing unmerited grace. A wonderful example is Karen Lebacqz’s pithy article “Alien Dignity: The Legacy of Helmut Thielicke for Bioethics.” Drawing on the German Lutheran theologian, Lebacqz, a United Church of Christ ethicist, suggests that “our worth is imparted by the love bestowed on us by God. Human worth is thus an ‘alien dignity,’ given in the relationship between humans and God. [It is] not some quality such as rationality that ‘imitates’ the character of the divine, but rather a statement of our relationship to God.” Before Thielicke’s time, Søren Kierkegaard sought to draw out the potentially radical, life-affirming implications of Lutheran soteriology. If grace is truly gratuitous, brought through Christ while we are yet sinners, any human life is incalculably gratuitous, a gift beyond reckoning that we never fully control.

The conviction that each life is intrinsically, incalculably valuable is subtly but significantly different from the conviction that we cannot judge a child’s worth by

the color of her skin or by her gender. The latter notion implies that we should suspend judgment about her worth until we have more information, a more reliable calculation of her potential contribution to society. To affirm instead that no human life may ever be rightly measured for estimable worth is to challenge both the old and the new eugenics. Such an affirmation leads some parents to refuse to ask "what kind of children?" Such an affirmation prompts some to be open to the frequent interruption of procreation, others to adopt supposedly "at risk" children. It leads some to work with students who are considered extraneous and others to fight for economic policies that will really "leave no child behind."

Jonathan Kozol gives a glimpse of this approach in an article for the Nation called "The Details of Life," which describes the chaotic but hopeful work of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in the Bronx. "Childhood ought to have at least a few entitlements that aren't entangled with utilitarian considerations," he notes. "One of them should be the right to a degree of unencumbered satisfaction in the sheer delight and goodness of existence in itself. Another ought to be the confidence of knowing that one's presence on this earth is taken as an unconditional blessing that is not contaminated by the economic uses that a nation does or does not have for you."

I suspect that Christians must disentangle the fundamentally "utilitarian considerations" that have come to define procreation in the United States. To view each child's presence on this earth as an unconditional, if also complicated, blessing seems an apt way to begin.