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# Fewer and Better Children: Race, Class, Religion, and Birth Control Reform in America

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# Fewer and Better Children: Race, Class, Religion, and Birth Control Reform in America

## **Abstract**

In the early 20th century, contraceptives were illegal and, for many, especially religious groups, taboo. But, in the span of just two years, between 1929 and 1931, many of the United States' most prominent religious groups pronounced contraceptives to be moral and began advocating for the laws restricting them to be repealed. Met with everything from support, to silence, to outright condemnation by other religious groups, these pronouncements and the debates they caused divided the American religious field by an issue of sex and gender for the first time. This article explains why America's religious groups took the positions they did at this crucial moment in history. In doing so, it demonstrates that the politics of sex and gender that divide American religion today is deeply rooted in century-old inequalities of race and class.

## **Disciplines**

Christian Denominations and Sects | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Gender and Sexuality | History of Religion | Political History | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | Sociology | Sociology of Religion | United States History | Women's History

# Fewer and Better Children: Race, Class, Religion, and Birth Control Reform in America<sup>1</sup>

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*University of Pennsylvania*

In the early 20th century, contraceptives were illegal and, for many, especially religious groups, taboo. But, in the span of just two years, between 1929 and 1931, many of the United States' most prominent religious groups pronounced contraceptives to be moral and began advocating for the laws restricting them to be repealed. Met with everything from support, to silence, to outright condemnation by other religious groups, these pronouncements and the debates they caused divided the American religious field by an issue of sex and gender for the first time. This article explains why America's religious groups took the positions they did at this crucial moment in history. In doing so, it demonstrates that the politics of sex and gender that divide American religion today is deeply rooted in century-old inequalities of race and class.

In just two years between 1929 and 1931, many of America's most prominent religious groups suddenly and definitively called for the laws restricting contraceptives to be rescinded. Other religious groups reacted swiftly, and often passionately, to these statements. Still others ignored them altogether.

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We will show that the stances religious groups took at this time can be explained by their position within the United States' system of racial and class stratification. We argue that religious organizations' advocacy for birth control was a critical component of a "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1986) to curtail the fertility of (mainly Catholic, but also Jewish) immigrants.

In the early 1920s the United States restricted immigration and stopped a seemingly endless tide of southern and eastern European immigrants. But by this time, millions of such immigrants already crowded America's largest cities. These immigrants were widely vilified as threats to the nation's political and economic institutions. In accordance with the increasingly influential pseudoscientific theories of heredity of the day, they were seen by many as a genetic threat to the very existence of the "American" population.

Our findings demonstrate that by the late 1920s, about half of America's most prominent religious groups believed that *race suicide* was occurring—that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were being outbred by southern and eastern European immigrants. However, believing in race suicide was not enough to cause religious organizations to officially advocate for birth control. To do so, a religious group also needed to believe in the *social gospel*, a theology that saw improving society as a fundamental duty of good Christians. Like concerns about race suicide, belief in the social gospel movement was pervasive among about half of all major denominations.

Nine of the most prominent religious groups in the country believed in both race suicide and the social gospel. These groups became the religious center of the racial project around birth control—the primary organizational vehicles to legitimate it and organize mass support, and ultimately the only groups that made public pronouncements in favor of liberalization at this time.

As figure 1 illustrates, the ways in which beliefs about race suicide and the social gospel intersected explain the stances of other religious groups as well. Those who believed in race suicide but not the social gospel became "unofficial supporters" and did not make official statements about birth control for another 30 years. Groups that believed in neither race suicide nor the social gospel saw no justification for the sudden wave of birth control liberalizations and became "critics" of reform. Groups that believed in the social gospel movement but not race suicide remained silent out of respect for their fellow religious activists whose racial views they rejected.

### RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND RELIGION

American religion today is deeply divided between "progressives" and "conservatives," terms that have become synonymous with opposing views of

	Did Not Believe in the Social Gospel	Believed in the Social Gospel
Concerned About "Race Suicide"	<p><b>Unofficial Supporters</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evangelical Synod of North America</li> <li>• Northern Baptist Convention</li> <li>• United Presbyterian Church of North America</li> <li>• Norwegian Lutheran Church in America</li> </ul>	<p><b>Early Liberalizers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Society of Friends (Orthodox)</li> <li>• Reform Judaism</li> <li>• Universalist Church</li> <li>• American Unitarian Association</li> <li>• Methodist Episcopal Church</li> <li>• Congregational Churches</li> <li>• Christian Church</li> <li>• Presbyterian Church in the USA</li> <li>• Protestant Episcopal Church</li> </ul>
Not Concerned about "Race Suicide"	<p><b>Critics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presbyterian Church in the United States</li> <li>• Southern Baptist Convention</li> <li>• Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints</li> <li>• Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod</li> <li>• Orthodox Judaism</li> <li>• Roman Catholic Church</li> </ul>	<p><b>Silent</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reformed Church in the United States</li> <li>• Methodist Episcopal Church, South</li> <li>• Conservative Judaism</li> <li>• Reformed Church in America</li> <li>• United Lutheran Church in America</li> <li>• Disciples of Christ</li> <li>• African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church</li> <li>• Churches of Christ</li> <li>• National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc.</li> </ul>

FIG. 1.—Stances on birth control by belief in race suicide and the social gospel

a few key issues that relate to sex and gender—namely abortion, feminism, and homosexuality (Davis and Robinson 1996; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Hoffmann and Miller 1997; McConkey 2001; Brooks 2002; Edgell 2006; Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). While most sociological studies of American religion and politics take these differences as a given or examine their correlates, we examine the roots of these differences—the first issue relevant to sex and gender, which galvanized the American religious field.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> We define religious field as the “organizational field” in American religious denominations competed “not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 150). There is one study of the field as a whole that deserves mention: Robert Wuthnow’s extremely influential *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), which highlights increasing and unequal access to higher education as the key factor behind divergent views within American religion. In *Restructuring*, Wuthnow examines factors, largely post–World War II, that have to do with class, mainly access to higher education, which explain increasing attitudinal variation within denominations (Wuthnow 1988, p. 154). Although we, too, are interested in the ways in which inequality has affected American religion (something that used to be a core part of the sociology of religion—e.g., Niebuhr [1929], Demerath [1965], Vidich and Bensman [1958], Weber [(1905) 2001]— but has largely been ignored for the past five decades, with the notable exceptions of Park and Reimer [2002], Keister [2003], and Smith and Farris [2005]), our study differs from Wuthnow’s in that we focus

## Religion and Birth Control Reform

Despite the fact that nothing created more controversy than denominations' stances on contraception circa 1930, little is known about the religious supporters or opponents of birth control outside of the infamous resistance of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Most studies of the birth control or eugenics movement (the key nonreligious promoter of race suicide concerns) say nothing about religion.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, most studies of American religion, including those that study the social gospel movement, say nothing about the wave of birth control advocacy that took place among American religious groups in the early 1930s, much less about other religious groups' reactions to that advocacy.<sup>5</sup>

These are major oversights. We found that denominations that were then, and remain today, America's staunchest religious "progressives" were deeply involved in birth control reform and that these efforts were profoundly intertwined with a process of racialization.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there has been little acknowledgment or examination of religion's often central role in racialization processes.<sup>7</sup>

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on earlier differences between denominations to explain the first issue of sex and gender that really divided it.

<sup>3</sup> Although predating birth control as issues, neither women's ordination nor woman suffrage was as divisive. Chaves (1997) demonstrates that women's ordination was not divisive, and Wilde (2013) found that while many denominations supported woman suffrage a position vis-à-vis the issue was not seen as necessary for nor defining of one's identity within the American religious field.

<sup>4</sup> This is true for studies focused on birth control (Kennedy 1970; Reed 1978; Gordon 1990; Franks 2005) or eugenics (Haller 1963; Pickens 1969; Ludmerer 1972; Rafter 1988, 1992, 1997; King and Ruggles 1990; Reilly 1991; Keyles 1995; Larson 1995; Kline 2001; Ramsden 2003; Black 2004; Stern 2005; Bruinius 2006). Rosen's (2004) *Preaching Eugenics* does examine the relationship between religious groups and the eugenics movement but portrays only progressive religious groups as eugenicists (an inaccuracy we correct with our more systematic sample). Leon (2004) focuses on a few Catholic outliers who were critically engaged with the movement. Neither provides any discussion of birth control reform.

<sup>5</sup> Studies of the social gospel movement (Latta 1936; Carter 1956; White 1990; Luker 1991; Marty 1992; Phillips 1996; Smith 2000) and American religious history more generally tend to ignore this wave of birth control reform (Szasz 1982; Ahlstrom 2004; Marsden 2006). Even Martin Marty, who acknowledges the Anglo-Saxon focus of American Protestantism at this time and quotes a contemporary observer noting that American Protestants were crusading for the "Americanization of immigrants, and even the gospel of eugenics and birth control" (Marty 1986 p. 215–16; see also p. 63) does not investigate these connections further. The sole exception is Tobin (2001). While her argument is consistent with ours, her book focuses on the early liberalizers and the critics, and largely misses the groups that avoided making public pronouncements.

<sup>6</sup> For information on how early stances on birth control relate to contemporary divisions with the American religious field, see Wilde (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Waters (1990) and Emerson and Smith (2000) are major exceptions. This is true despite the fact that early sociologists of religion saw it as "a very important factor in the preservation of racial character" (Niebuhr 1929, p. 110) and a key source of social identity (Herberg

Theories of racialization examine how “race,” “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies,” and racial categories are “created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1986, pp. 55–56). A racial project is “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning” (p. 56).

Religion was a central part of the racial project of birth control reform. This is true in terms of whose fertility was to be controlled, as well as explaining who was attempting to do the controlling. The targets of the project were largely Irish and Italian Catholic (Alba 1985; Erie 1988; Jacobson 1998; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; Roediger 2006; Ignatiev 2009) and Jewish immigrants (Brodtkin 1998). These groups numerically and politically threatened the Protestant establishment (Baltzell 1964)—the upper- and middle-class “gatekeepers” who were America’s ruling class (Evans 2002; Beisel and Kay 2004; Pyle and Davidson, in press).<sup>8</sup> Eugenicists zeroed in on the establishment’s religious leaders, using them to further their eugenics education campaigns among the masses and legitimize their legislative wrangling among elites.

It is important to emphasize here that religion was not just correlated with a “desirable” or “undesirable” status. It was an essential piece of that status. Religion was a critical dimension on which race was “culturally figured and represented, the manner in which race [came] to be meaningful as a descriptor of group or individual identity, social issues, and experience”

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1955). Likewise, there has been almost no investigation of the significant class differences that remain among American religious groups (notable exceptions being Pyle and Davidson [2003] and Smith and Faris [2005]), even though class differences were so germane that many early sociologists took them as a given or considered them an essential part of stratification in the United States (e.g., Baltzell 1964; Demerath 1965). Sociologists of religion have continued to emphasize the importance of religion for immigrants (Warner and Wittner 1998; Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Chen 2002; Kurien 2004; Cadge 2005; Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Mooney 2009) and African Americans (Patillo-McCoy 1998; Patterson 1998; Emerson and Smith 2000; Wood 2002; McRoberts 2003; Marti 2009), but this is not the same thing as racialization processes.

<sup>8</sup>Of course, other nonwhite groups were also the focus of eugenicist policies, particularly regarding immigration restriction (i.e., the Japanese and Chinese Exclusion Acts; Chang 2010), intermarriage between blacks and whites, and the involuntary sterilization of many African Americans (Zuberi 2001). However, because of their geographic distribution, these other nonwhite groups were not generally of concern to the early liberalizers, something we examine in much greater detail below.

## Religion and Birth Control Reform

(Winant 1998, p. 756). In sum, one cannot understand birth control reform within the American religious field without understanding how race was seen at the time. And one cannot understand the racial categories at the time (particularly in the Northeast) without understanding how they were influenced by religion. The story of birth control reform in general and within the American religious field in particular provides a powerful example of the enduring importance of how race, class, and religion intersect in the United States and the implications of that for views of gender (Collins 1990; McCall 2001, 2005).

### DATA AND METHODS

This study includes 28 of America's largest and most prominent religious denominations. Together they represent 90% of the 55 million Americans who claimed to be a member of a religious denomination in 1926 (the year closest to the liberalizations that had a *Census of Religious Bodies*; see table 1).<sup>9</sup>

The primary data presented here come from an analysis of each denomination's periodical(s) between 1919 and 1934.<sup>10</sup> Although there was some

<sup>9</sup>The majority of these denominations (almost two-thirds, 17) were included because they had more than 400,000 members in 1926. Only one denomination that met this initial threshold, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, has been left out. We were unable to locate any copies of its periodical the *Christian Recorder* for our time period. Another 11 denominations were included to ensure that the factors we identified among this sample of larger denominations were generalizable to smaller denominations. We first included any smaller denomination that made an early pronouncement in support of birth control (there were four of these: the American Unitarian Association, Reform Jews, the Society of Friends, and the Universalist Church) or merged with an early liberalizer during the period of analysis (there was only one of these, the Christian Church, which merged with the larger Congregationalist Church in 1930). To make sure that the addition of these smaller denominations did not bias the sample and to allow us to control on theological leanings and denominational history, we also added denominations by a few other criteria. We included any major precursor denomination that was not an early liberalizer but would later merge with one (there were three of these: Evangelical Synod of North America, Reformed Church in the United States, and United Presbyterian Church of North America). We also included any denomination that would otherwise provide an important comparison group for an early liberalizer (as Conservative and Orthodox Jews did for Reform Jews). Finally, we looked for denominations that were in the American Eugenics Society archives (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia), and thus possibly eugenicists, but not early liberalizers (there was only one that fit this category: the Reformed Church in America, which turned out not to be a strong supporter of eugenics).

<sup>10</sup>We do not assume that every member who was reading these periodicals agreed with the views expressed in them (or, indeed, with the official stances of their denomination). Instead, we treat these periodicals and the articles we obtained as representative of the general beliefs and opinions of the denomination, the level of analysis that is our focus.



TABLE 1  
SAMPLE OF RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

	Members in 1926 <sup>a</sup>	Periodical	Liberalized on Birth Control
Early liberalizers:			
Society of Friends (Orthodox)	91,326	<i>Friend; American Friend; Friends Intelligencer</i>	1929 <sup>b</sup>
Reform Judaism	...	<i>Union Tidings</i> <sup>c</sup>	1929 <sup>d</sup>
Universalist Church	54,957	<i>Universalist/Christian Leader</i>	1929 <sup>e</sup>
American Unitarian Association <sup>f</sup>	60,152	<i>Christian Register</i>	1930 <sup>g</sup>
Methodist Episcopal Church	4,080,777	<i>Christian Advocate</i>	1931 <sup>h</sup>
Congregational Churches	881,696	<i>Congregationalist</i> <sup>i</sup>	1931 <sup>j</sup>
Christian Church	112,795	<i>Herald of Gospel Liberty</i> <sup>k</sup>	1931 <sup>l</sup>
Presbyterian Church in the USA	1,894,030	<i>New Era; Presbyterian Magazine</i>	1931 <sup>m</sup>
Protestant Episcopal Church	1,859,086	<i>Living Church</i>	1934 <sup>n</sup>
Unofficial supporters:			
Evangelical Synod of North America	314,518 <sup>o</sup>	<i>Evangelical Herald</i>	1947 <sup>p</sup>
Northern Baptist Convention	1,289,966	<i>Baptist</i>	1959 <sup>q</sup>
United Presbyterian Church of North America	171,571	<i>United Presbyterian</i>	1959 <sup>r</sup>
Norwegian Lutheran Church in America	496,707	<i>Lutheran Church Herald</i>	1966 <sup>s</sup>
Critics:			
Presbyterian Church in the United States	451,043	<i>Presbyterian Survey</i>	1960 <sup>t</sup>
Southern Baptist Convention	3,524,378	<i>Christian Index</i>	1977 <sup>u</sup>
Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints	542,194	<i>Improvement Era</i>	1998 <sup>v</sup>

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod <sup>w</sup>	1,040,275	<i>Lutheran Witness</i>	1981 <sup>x</sup>
Orthodox Judaism	...	<i>Jewish Forum</i>	Never
Roman Catholic Church	18,605,003	<i>America</i>	Never
Silent:			
Reformed Church in the United States	361,286	<i>Reformed Church Messenger</i>	1947 <sup>y</sup>
Methodist Episcopal Church, South	2,487,694	<i>Methodist Quarterly Review</i>	1956 <sup>z</sup>
Conservative Judaism	...	<i>S.A.J. Review</i> <sup>aa</sup>	1960 <sup>bb</sup>
Reformed Church in America	153,739	<i>Christian Intelligencer</i> <sup>cc</sup>	1962 <sup>dd</sup>
United Lutheran Church in America	1,214,340	<i>Lutheran</i>	1966 <sup>ee</sup>
Disciples of Christ	1,377,595	<i>World Call</i>	1972 <sup>ff</sup>
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	456,813	<i>A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review</i>	Silent
Churches of Christ	433,714	<i>Gospel Advocate</i>	Silent
National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. <sup>gg</sup>	3,196,623	<i>National Baptist Union Review</i>	Silent

<sup>a</sup> Data and names are based on *Religious Bodies: 1926* (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930) or is the first known name.

<sup>b</sup> "A Statement on Birth Control" 1933. Women's Problems Group of the Social Order Committee, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Arch Street), Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Orthodox) Archive, Social Order Committee Collection, p. 1.

<sup>c</sup> *Union Tidings* was available only until 1930 and focused mainly on the Reform Movement, not national news in general. Thus we also consulted *The Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*.

<sup>d</sup> Israel 1929.

<sup>e</sup> Universalist General Convention 1929.

<sup>f</sup> "Unitarians" in the 1926 census.

<sup>g</sup> American Unitarian Association 1930.

<sup>h</sup> Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America 1934.

<sup>i</sup> *The Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty* after 1930.

<sup>j</sup> General Council of the Congregational and Christian Churches 1931.

<sup>k</sup> *The Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty* after 1930.

<sup>l</sup> General Council of the Congregational and Christian Churches 1931.

<sup>m</sup> Presbyterian Church in the USA 1931. Pronouncement was ratified by "the special commission on marriage divorce and remarriage" of the PCUSA, April 27, 1931, but tabled at the General Assembly meeting one month later because of merger talks with the southern PCUS ("Birth Control Out as Issue of Presbyterians," May 28, 1931, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

<sup>n</sup> Episcopal Church 1935; liberalized in November 1934, published in 1935.

- o Does not include those under age 13.
- p Evangelical and Reformed Church 1947.
- q American Baptist Convention 1959.
- r United Presbyterian Church in the USA 1959.
- s American Lutheran Church 1966.
- t Presbyterian Church in the United States 1960.
- u Southern Baptist Convention 1977.
- v Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 1998.
- w Name "Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States," 1926 census and until 1947.
- x Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Social Concerns Committee 1981.
- y "Christian Social Action: Report of the the Committee: Future Program: The Family," 1947.
- z Methodist Church 1956.
- aa Unfortunately, the *S.A.J. Review* was not a popularly oriented periodical and folded in May 31, 1929, just as the birth control liberalizations began.
- bb Bokser 1960.
- cc Between 1922 and 1930, the *Christian Intelligencer* was *The Christian Intelligencer and Mission Field*.
- dd Reformed Church in America 1962.
- ee American Lutheran Church 1966.
- ff General office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) 1972.
- gg "Negro Baptists" in the 1926 census.

## Religion and Birth Control Reform

unavoidable variation in the periodicals, in general, they were remarkably comparable. Two-thirds of the periodicals were weeklies, and all but two of the periodicals were popularly oriented and written for a general, lay audience.<sup>11</sup>

With the rare exception of those that were electronically searchable, the authors or our assistants examined each of the periodicals by hand and gathered all articles that mentioned birth control, eugenics, birthrates, race, racial stock, race suicide, immigration, Catholics, the Federal Council of Churches, the social gospel, science, evolution, fundamentalists or modernists, woman suffrage, and temperance. On average, we summarized, coded, and analyzed about 120 articles for 35 periodicals, for a total of about 4,000 articles.<sup>12</sup>

All denominations' stances on birth control were coded during the peak years of discussion (1929–31). Those coded as “early liberalizers” had an official statement in support of birth control promulgated by an important committee or the official denominational leadership (all also promoted legalization in their periodicals) during this time. “Unofficial supporters” did not make an official statement in favor of legalization for at least another 20 years but usually published at least one supportive article per year. Groups coded as “critics” either officially condemned contraception or published numerous articles criticizing it, and often the early liberalizers, during the peak years. Denominations coded as “silent” on birth control said nothing on the subject between 1929 and 1932.

The codes for all our other measures capture both the frequency and fervor with which issues were mentioned in the denominations' periodicals. In general, “strong supporters” of eugenics, race suicide, or the social gospel published one to two supportive articles per year during the peak years of discussion (1929–32). Groups opposed to eugenics, race suicide, or the social gospel published very few articles on these subjects (with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, whose opposition to eugenics and race suicide was vehemently and frequently expressed), on average

<sup>11</sup> We gave extra weight to statements from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, because their periodicals were published quarterly. The groups coded as silent did not have periodicals that were more likely to simply be silent on all issues or that were published less often and thus presented fewer opportunities to register opinions.

<sup>12</sup> When it was difficult to determine exactly which periodical was the “primary” periodical for a denomination, we analyzed any major periodical, for a total of 31 periodicals for 28 denominations. We also analyzed the primary periodicals for the American Eugenics Society (*Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*), the Federal Council of Churches (*Federal Council Bulletin*), the American Birth Control League (*Birth Control Review: To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds*), as well as the mainline Protestant periodical *Christian Century*.

publishing one article roughly every five years, but those they did were very strong in their criticism.

To get a clear picture of the way in which immigration was related to views of race and thus birth control, we created maps of the geographic concentration of all our denominations.<sup>13</sup> Data on the number of members of each religious denomination were gathered from the *Census of Religious Bodies* (1926), from which we also obtained measures of class and other demographic information.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE AMERICAN EUGENICS SOCIETY, BIRTH CONTROL, AND THE RACIALIZATION OF RELIGION

The movement to legalize contraceptives was spearheaded by feminist activist Margaret Sanger and her American Birth Control League (ABCL). It is well known that the ABCL was intimately involved with the eugenics movement, the pseudoscientific movement for racial “improvement” (Gordon 1990; Franks 2005). After all, the subtitle of the *Birth Control Review* was *To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds*. It is less known that Sanger was not overly welcoming to religious groups, but we found no standing committees dedicated to mobilizing religious leaders, few relevant articles in *Birth Control Review*, and no other evidence of interest in or attempts to communicate with them.<sup>15</sup> In fact, we could find no archival evidence of discernible connections between the ABCL and nearly half of the early liberalizers (see table 2).<sup>16</sup> Most of America’s religious supporters appear to

<sup>13</sup> All maps were made with ArcGIS 10. County borders were determined by the *County Shape File* from the National Historical Geographic Information System (1930). When discrepancies between the 1926 and 1930 borders arose, we used the 1930 borders. Data are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1926).

<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, we could find only one concrete measure of class from our time period: ministers’ mean salaries from the 1916 census and no data on the proportion of each religious denomination that was foreign born. While certainly not as good as a measure of members’ incomes or educational levels, mean ministers’ salaries are generally consistent with what we know of denominations’ class positions from the earliest American surveys, the first of which was conducted by Gallup in 1939 (Cantril 1943).

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that involvement with the ABCL was not an important indication of other qualities, particularly feminism: the religious groups involved with it were among the first to make pronouncements on birth control. Periodical research suggests that they were more feminist in their orientation than the other early liberalizers and more strongly supported woman suffrage. However, overall, a denomination’s views toward feminism do not explain the stance it ultimately took in these first debates over contraception. Only about half of the early liberalizers were in favor of suffrage or ordained women, and only a third of them had an autonomous women’s organization (see Wilde [2013] for more information).

have been brought into the birth control movement not by the ABCL but by one of Sanger's closest organizational allies, the American Eugenics Society (AES).

The premier eugenics education association at the time (Ludmerer 1972; Mehler 1988; Rosen 2004; Franks 2005), the AES cultivated close ties with its "eugenic apostles" (Sherbon 1928, p. 3), most of whom were "nationally prominent ministers" and rabbis (Mehler 1988, p. 88; Leon 2004, p. 8). In contrast to the ABCL, the AES had well-funded standing committees, especially the Committee for Cooperation with Clergymen (hereafter, Committee) and regular outreach campaigns and columns in *Eugenics* written for and by religious leaders, all dedicated to communicating with America's religious elite.

Table 2 demonstrates that this outreach was successful. Twelve of the 28 denominations in our sample had representatives on the Committee. Even more denominations had ministers submit sermons to the Committee's biannual contests for the best sermon on eugenics.<sup>17</sup> Almost all these denominations also expressed strong support for eugenics in their periodicals. More importantly, all of those that would ultimately express support, whether officially or unofficially, for birth control expressed strongly eugenicist views in their periodicals.

In the mid-1920s articles from eugenicist religious groups that touched on eugenics generally echoed AES beliefs and priorities. Legislatively speaking, they supported immigration restriction and involuntary sterilization. More generally, they promoted positive eugenics, the idea that "desirable" people should have more (at least four) children (see Glass 1986; Rosen 2004).

However, by the late 1920s the AES began to campaign for the legalization of contraceptive methods and information. It did so because, in large part as a result of Sanger's efforts, its members had concluded that poor immigrants were having such large families because they did not have access to doctors (up until that point, the only legal way individuals could obtain contraceptives).

Some, but not all, of the religious groups affiliated with the AES threw their weight and legitimacy behind the AES's campaign and began making pronouncements about the legalization of contraceptives. Those who did believed that it was their religious duty to make pronouncements on such issues because they were believers in the social gospel.

<sup>17</sup>The 1926 sermons survived, as did the cover letters from the sermons submitted to the 1928 competition. Together, these gave us a total of 68 sermons submitted by the pastors of 68 churches (counting multiple submissions only once), of which we were able to place 62 AES papers (42/44 from 1926 and 20/24 from 1928), or 91% in denomination after extensive research.

TABLE 2  
EXPLAINING EARLY SUPPORT FOR BIRTH CONTROL

	Clergy on ABCL	Clergy on AES <sup>a</sup>	Sermons to AES	Eugenics in Periodical	Race Suicide in Periodical	Social Gospel in Periodical	Federal Council of Churches Member <sup>b</sup>
<b>Early liberalizers:</b>							
Society of Friends (Orthodox) . . . . .	0	1	0	Strong	Strong <sup>c</sup>	Strong <sup>d</sup>	Yes
Reform Judaism . . . . .	3	2	2	Strong	Strong	Strong	No
Universalist Church . . . . .	1	0	1	Strong	Strong	Strong	No
American Unitarian Association . . . . .	2	0	3	Strong	Strong	Strong	No
Methodist Episcopal Church . . . . .	2	4	11	Strong	Strong	Strong	Yes
Congregational Churches . . . . .	0	3	14 <sup>e</sup>	Strong	Strong	Strong	Yes
Christian Church . . . . .	0	0	2	Strong	Strong	Strong	Yes
Presbyterian Church in the USA . . . . .	0	3	10	Strong	Strong	Strong	Yes
Protestant Episcopal Church . . . . .	3	4	5	Strong	Strong	Strong	Yes <sup>f</sup>
% of early liberalizers . . . . .	56	66	100 <sup>g</sup>	100	100	100	66
<b>Unofficial supporters:</b>							
Evangelical Synod of North America . . . . .	0	0	0	Weak	Weak <sup>h</sup>	Opposed	Yes
Northern Baptist Convention . . . . .	0	5	5	Strong	Strong	Conflicted	Yes
United Presbyterian Church of North America . . . . .	0	0	2	Strong	Strong	Opposed	Yes
Norwegian Lutheran Church in America . . . . .	0	0	1	Strong	Strong	Opposed	No
% of unofficial supporters . . . . .	0	25	75	100	100	0	75
<b>Critics:</b>							
Presbyterian Church in the United States . . . . .	0	1	1	Strong	Silent	Silent	No
Southern Baptist Convention . . . . .	0	0	0	Strong	Opposed <sup>i</sup>	Opposed	No
Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints . . . . .	0	0	0	Silent	Silent	Silent	No
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . . . .	0	0	0	Opposed	Silent	Opposed	No
Orthodox Judaism . . . . .	0	0	0	Opposed	Silent	Silent	No
Roman Catholic Church . . . . .	0	2	0	Opposed	Opposed	Silent	No
% of critics . . . . .	0	33	17	33	0	0	0
<b>Silent:</b>							
Reformed Church in the United States . . . . .	0	0	0	Opposed	Silent	Strong	Yes
Methodist Episcopal Church, South . . . . .	0	1	2	Opposed	Silent	Strong	Yes

Conservative Judaism . . . . .	0	0	0	Silent	Silent	Weak	No
Reformed Church in America . . . . .	0	1	2	Weak <sup>j</sup>	Silent	Weak	Yes
United Lutheran Church in America . . . . .	0	0	1	Silent	Silent	Weak	Yes <sup>k</sup>
Disciples of Christ . . . . .	0	1	0	Silent	Silent	Strong	Yes
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church . . . . .	0	0	0	Opposed	Silent	Strong	Yes
Churches of Christ . . . . .	0	0	0	Silent	Silent	Silent	No
National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. . . . .	0	0	0	Silent	Silent	Silent	Yes
% of silent groups . . . . .	0	33	33	0	0	78	78

<sup>a</sup> Committee for Coordinating with Clergymen.

<sup>b</sup> As of 1932.

<sup>c</sup> The *Yearbook's* "Resolution on Social Betterment" voiced concerns about the "disproportionate number of children born within those classes of society where destitution, unhygienic condition or irresponsibility prevail," circumstances that would yield "comparatively poor progeny, to the detriment of the families concerned as well as of the nation." It thus recommended that citizens "be more carefully and eugenically selected" (Frisch 1926, p. 103).

<sup>d</sup> Eight articles advocating social justice and a social gospel point of view were found in the *Yearbook* (in 1924 and 1926-32) as well as in *Union Tidings* (1919-22 and 1925-30); e.g., "The rabbi [earnestly desires] to hasten the coming of the day of social peace, based on justice. . . . Social righteousness is fundamental to our religious philosophy. . . [an] essential principle of our religious point of view" (Wolsey 1927, p. 227).

<sup>e</sup> Three of these were submitted by pastors at "Federated Churches," a loose affiliation of Congregationalist, Northern Baptist, or Methodist Episcopal Churches.

<sup>f</sup> "Cooperating."

<sup>g</sup> This percentage excludes Quakers, who do not typically give planned sermons.

<sup>h</sup> Only one article in the *Evangelical Herald* between 1929 and 1932 indicated concern about race suicide: "Historians ascribe the rudeness and coarseness of people and clergy in the Middle Ages to a large extent to the race suicide forced upon the priests and nuns. . . . Our cultured classes—for it is they which are in greatest danger—should be taught that the practice of birth control in such a way as to lead to permanent birth prevention is a *sin*—a sin against nature, against one's better instincts, against one's life-partner, and that it is also unpatriotic" (1929, p. 638).

<sup>i</sup> Though there were three articles found in the *Christian Index* in 1919, 1924-25, and 1931 that vaguely suggest the existence of differential birthrates, the one article that explicitly mentioned race suicide was completely dismissive: "We note with pleasurable satisfaction that Atlanta does not believe in race suicide. Recently we had nineteen babies in the hospital at one time" (1924, p. 28).

<sup>j</sup> Only two articles found in the *Christian Intelligencer* during the peak years of discussion (1929-32) mentioned eugenics, both of which focused on fitness for marriage, the most popular part of the movement; e.g., "only a small percentage of married couples are fit physically, intellectually or morally, to bring up children" (Students 1930, p. 56).

<sup>k</sup> "Consultative."



PROGRESSIVE PROTESTANTISM AND THE SOCIAL  
GOSPEL MOVEMENT

The social gospel movement first emerged in the United States around the late 1880s and remained a strong force in American religion for the next 50 years (May 1949; Carter 1956; Hopkins 1967; Hutchinson 1992; Phillips 1996; Marsden 2006).<sup>18</sup> Reacting to “a series of large-scale, violent labor conflicts,” social gospelers tended to be not laborers but rather much more elite Protestants troubled by the inequality that they saw as causing labor strife (May 1949, p. 91).

Active social reformers (Carter 1956; Hopkins 1967; Rosen 2004), social gospelers believed that Christ would return only after humans had finished preparing the earth for his arrival and that doing so required eradicating a number of social ills, especially poverty and war (May 1949, pp. 184–85).<sup>19</sup> Social gospelers had a particular focus on urban slums in industrialized cities, which was more than apparent in supporters’ periodicals. For example, the Christian Church’s *Herald of Gospel Liberty* asserted that “no man who opposes the social gospel ever has spent much time in the receiving ward of a great city hospital, where the bruised and maimed and dying are carried in from the shops and streets” (1924a, p. 1036).<sup>20</sup>

Although a systematic study of supporters and critics of the theology has been lacking, researchers agree that supporters were mainly elite, northern denominations (May 1949; Hopkins 1967), including even Reform Jews (Carter 1956, pp. 2, 4). Social gospelers were quite aware of their privileged position vis-à-vis those they sought to help, as the following quote from the *Congregationalist* (1925, p. 68) indicates:

<sup>18</sup> Although most studies of the movement argue that it was in decline by the 1920s, Carter found that it was revitalized by the Depression, with groups blazing “forth with all the old vigor” by 1932 (1956, p. 143), a finding confirmed by our primary research.

<sup>19</sup> Many have assumed that prohibition and abolition were major precursors to the movement (White and Hopkins 1976), but we found that both were only weakly correlated with belief in the social gospel. Less than two-thirds of strong social gospelers were abolitionists, and 40% of those denominations that had been well-known abolitionists did not express strong support for the social gospel. More than a quarter of those opposed to the social gospel were prohibitionists—mostly from the South (for more information, see Wilde [2013]). Many have also assumed that fundamentalists rejected the social gospel, but we found that only half of those who self-identified as fundamentalists rejected the theology, a finding that is consistent with Marsden’s (2006) argument that not all fundamentalists eschewed social reform.

<sup>20</sup> It is safe to assume that this quote was at least poorly directed at members. The Christian Church was the most rural strong social gospelers in our sample, with only 15% of its members living in urban areas circa 1926 (see table 3). Its greater support for the social gospel when compared to other more rural churches seems to have been a result of its interest in merging with the much more urban Congregationalist Church, which did happen in 1930.

## Religion and Birth Control Reform

The people who bear the burdens of modern industry and suffer from its moral limitations are, on the whole, not in the churches. The people in the churches are the higher middle classes who reap whatever advantages modern machine industry brings to the few and the lower middle classes who enjoy the comforts and conveniences. . . . We can, therefore, if we want to, remain gloriously oblivious to the task of humanizing industry. . . . [This increases the burden for] every prophet of social righteousness who insists on applying Christ's gospel to industrial relationships.

Like belief in eugenics and race suicide, we found that belief in the social gospel was prominent among more than half (16/28) of the denominations in our sample (see table 2). However, while this is the same proportion of denominations that believed in eugenics, nearly half of the eugenicists in our sample were not big social gospelers, and nearly half of social gospelers rejected eugenics (see fig. 1). However, when the leaders of a denomination did believe in the social gospel and were also concerned about race suicide, began to see birth control in a new light.

### THE EARLY LIBERALIZERS

More than a quarter of the largest and most prominent American religious groups liberalized on birth control in the mere two years between 1929 and 1931. These groups were mostly mainline Protestants and thus founding members of the organizational center of mainline Protestantism, the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), which also came out with a statement in favor of birth control in 1931. However, they were joined by Reform Jews, as well as Unitarians and Universalists, whose religious beliefs were too heterodox for them to be considered Christian and were thus unwelcome in the FCC. Furthermore, there were many mainline Protestant members of the FCC that did not liberalize. Instead of membership in the FCC, it was their affiliations with the AES that united the early liberalizers.

### Undaunting Belief in Eugenics

The early liberalizers were not shy about their belief in the importance of heredity, their support for the AES, or the scientific application of eugenics in general. For example, the American Unitarian Association's periodical the *Christian Register* (which published at least two articles promoting eugenics annually between 1929–31) asked rather matter of factly: "Shall we harness heredity to produce better types of cattle, dogs, and horses, and do nothing with it to produce better types of men? Surely as human beings we are as much entitled to the benefits of good breeding as are the brutes. If eugenics were to accomplish nothing more than the giving to the members of society a sound physical birthright, would not that in itself be a stupen-

dous achievement?" (Miller 1932, p. 516). The article closed by asserting: "The church has a responsibility for the improvement of the human stock" (Miller 1932, p. 516). Similarly, the Methodist Episcopal Church's *Christian Advocate* asked, "If we do a little selecting with figs and pigs and mice why not use the same common sense with men?" (Stockdale 1931, p. 122).

For eugenicists, and the religious leaders who supported them, the "selecting" that was currently happening was disastrous. "Undesirables" were having far too many children, as all of the early liberalizers lamented. For example, the Universalist's *Christian Leader* cautioned, "The most alarming tendency of our time is found in the low birth-rate among the superior breeds and the high birth-rate among the inferior. Without much question we are breeding twice as fast from the worst as from the best. No observing and thinking person can overlook this problem" (Fletcher 1930, p. 663). These groups saw differential birth rates as a result of the fact that "birth control is already practiced virtually everywhere by the well-to-do classes" (Frisch 1926, p. 103; Israel 1929, p. 86), as Reform Jews noted. Cognizant of the "danger to society . . . the decline of the birth rate among the more educated and privileged classes" created, by the late 1920s, these denominations decided that there was "need for birth control among the poorer classes of society," as the Quaker periodical the *Friend* argued (Furnas 1930, p. 571).

These religious leaders saw class differences as hereditary. Thus, their solution was that the highly educated should breed more, not that all people should become more highly educated. These beliefs are especially apparent in statements that explicitly reference race suicide. For example, the newly merged periodical the *Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty* insisted, "Every marriage must have a minimum of three children in order to fulfill its social obligation in maintaining the present level of population. . . . Those who are able must average four or more in order to prevent race suicide. Right here we face the alarming situation that so far as the educated people are concerned race suicide has already begun" (Spoolman 1932, p. 1336). Similarly, the Unitarian *Christian Register* (1930, p. 586) warned, "The self-evident fact that the desirable classes are not reproducing themselves, and that the weaklings are, is ominous for the future. The average woman American college graduate has only one and a half children when she ought to have four, if the members of her class are to be kept up."

The uneducated who were so rapidly breeding were a part of (in the words of the early liberalizers) "the onrushing tide of mankind" (Woodruff 1931, p. 397), "the flood of undesirables" who had come "to our shores" from foreign lands (*Herald of Gospel Liberty* 1924c, p. 101).

Table 3 demonstrates that the early liberalizers were among the oldest, most urban, and most northeastern of the denominations, with the smallest

growth rates. As a comparison of figures 2 and 3 demonstrates, they were concentrated in the same areas with the greatest influx of Roman Catholic immigrants.<sup>21</sup>

Just as they documented birthrate differentials between the native and foreign born, or the desirable and undesirable, early liberalizers noted the rapid growth of the Roman Catholic Church, which coincided with this immigration. Sometimes they even directly compared Catholic and Protestant birthrates, as did the Unitarians when they reported that “the Catholic birth rate in this country is seventy per cent. higher than the birth rate for the country as a whole” and warned that Catholics were “increasing nearly five times as rapidly as non-Catholics” (*Christian Register* 1931, p. 514).

The increase of the Catholic population was a threat because Catholic immigrants, and especially their children, were voters. Complaining, for example, that America had become “the dumping ground of the least promising stock of the nations of southern Europe,” Methodist pastor Reverend George Fetter warned his congregants that “the largest percentage of future American voters were coming from the city’s most unpromising environment and in many cases from its most deficient stock.”<sup>22</sup> Immigrants were continually painted as easily “exploited (and by their own race)” (Stelzle 1930, p. 273) or “too easily controlled by the process of suggestion,” particularly “by politicians” (Holmes 1930, p. 221) as separate articles in *Presbyterian Magazine* lamented. Other groups simply referred to them as “ignorant,” and therefore dangerous, as did the following article from the Congregationalist Christian Church’s periodical:

Speaking a foreign language, many of them, bewildered by the strangeness of their environs, making no contacts with all that means America to us, save through *the ward politician* and the foreman in some factory, how are we going to build them into a worthful citizenship? . . . The problem seemed utterly hopeless while our immigration doors stood wide open. It is now clarified to this extent that we have largely stopped all fresh invasions. But we have millions of such people on our hands. How are we going to lift so vast a horde to the bare minimum of what constitutes real American manhood and womanhood? . . . Given ignorance and poverty almost anything can happen, and we have these forces at work in some form or other throughout almost half our population. (Elmore 1931, pp. 894–95)

Birth control was an obvious solution, given the ever-increasing Catholic population and the political realities that came with it. Of course, it was only a solution if poor Catholics would use it—something that concerned

<sup>21</sup>Of course, there were Jewish immigrants in these areas; however, Jews were much smaller in proportion than Catholics and do not seem to have been as big of a concern to eugenicists (for more on Jews and the eugenic movement see Wilde [2013]).

<sup>22</sup>Reverend George C. Fetter to First Baptist Church in Ottawa, Ill., 1926, “Baptist Sermon on Eugenics.” AES papers, box 14, folder “George C. Fetter 1926,” American Philosophical Society (APS), Philadelphia.

TABLE 3  
DEMOGRAPHICS OF RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

	Date Founded	Mean Ministers' Salary, 1916 (\$)	% Growth 1916-26	% Urban	% Northeast
Early liberalizers:					
Society of Friends (Orthodox) . . . . .	1900 <sup>a</sup>	681	-1	39	12
Reform Judaism . . . . .	1873	...	...	...	...
Universalist Church . . . . .	1866	1,641	-6	75	68
American Unitarian Association . . . . .	1825	2,080	-27	92	69
Methodist Episcopal Church . . . . .	1844	1,223	10	54	28
Congregational Churches . . . . .	1620	1,343	9 <sup>b</sup>	69	47
Christian Church . . . . .	1792	776	-5	25	15
Presbyterian Church in the USA . . . . .	1789	1,474	17 <sup>c</sup>	71	40
Protestant Episcopal Church . . . . .	1789	1,632	25	83	52
Mean . . . . .	1811	1,356	3	64	41
Unofficial supporters:					
Evangelical Synod of North America . . . . .	1872	890	-8	65	10
Northern Baptist Convention . . . . .	1814 <sup>d</sup>	1,166	8 <sup>e</sup>	69	42
United Presbyterian Church of North America . . . . .	1858	1,381	7	66	57
Norwegian Lutheran Church in America . . . . .	1917	1,081 <sup>f</sup>	8 <sup>g</sup>	25	2
Mean . . . . .	1865	1,122	4	56	28
Critics:					
Presbyterian Church in the United States . . . . .	1861	1,351	26	60	0
Southern Baptist Convention . . . . .	1845	1,072	30 <sup>h</sup>	28	0
Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints . . . . .	1830	...	34	52	1
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . . . .	1847	755	68	55	10
Orthodox Judaism . . . . .	1898	...	...	...	...
Roman Catholic Church . . . . .	1565	838	18	80	50
Mean . . . . .	1856 <sup>i</sup>	1,004	35	55	12
Silent groups:					
Reformed Church in the United States . . . . .	1747	1,085	3 <sup>j</sup>	56	63
Methodist Episcopal Church, South . . . . .	1844	1,037	18	36	0

Conservative Judaism . . . . .	1913	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .
Reformed Church in America . . . . .	1792	1,368	6	68
United Lutheran Church in America . . . . .	1918	1,205 <sup>k</sup>	18 <sup>l</sup>	62
Disciples of Christ . . . . .	1832	1,251	12	4
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church . . . . .	1821	502	78	11
Churches of Christ . . . . .	1906	. . . . .	36	1
National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. . . . .	1895	572	7 <sup>m</sup>	39
Mean . . . . .	1852	1,003	22	48

NOTE.—Founding dates are from Atwood et al. (2005) and Melton (2009); salary data are from U.S. Bureau of the Census (1919); % Growth calculated with data from U.S. Bureau of the Census (1930, pp. 46–51); % Urban is the percentage of all members of a denomination who belong to a congregation located in an incorporated center with at least 2,500 inhabitants in 1920 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 15); states included in % Northeast are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

<sup>a</sup> Friends General Conference.  
<sup>b</sup> 1916 membership numbers include the Evangelical Protestant Church of North America, which merged with Congregational Churches in 1925, so % growth is not falsely inflated (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).

<sup>c</sup> This figure includes members of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, which merged with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1920 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).

<sup>d</sup> The denomination traces its origins to 1814, but split into separate Northern and Southern groups in 1845.

<sup>e</sup> 1916 membership numbers include Free Baptists, which merged with the Northern Baptist Convention in 1911, so % growth is not falsely inflated (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).

<sup>f</sup> This figure includes minister salaries for Hauge's Synod and the United Norwegian Church, which merged with Norwegian Lutheran Church in 1917. 1916 membership numbers include Hauge's Synod and the United Norwegian Church, which merged with Norwegian Lutheran Church in 1917, so that % growth is not falsely inflated (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).

<sup>g</sup> American Baptist Association splintered off of Southern Baptist Convention in 1924 and became a denomination itself totaling 117,858 in 1926. Thus, the % growth of the Southern Baptist Convention is slightly suppressed (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).  
<sup>i</sup> Excludes the Roman Catholic Church because its extremely early founding date skews the results.

<sup>j</sup> 1916 membership numbers include the Hungarian Reformed Church, which merged with Reformed Church in the United States in 1921, so percent growth is not falsely inflated (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).  
<sup>k</sup> United Lutheran Church in America was formed in 1918 out of a merger between the General Synod, the United Synod in the South, and the General Council; all three denominations are included in mean minister's salary, 1916.

<sup>l</sup> 1916 membership numbers include the General Synod, the United Synod in the South, and the General Council, which merged to form United Lutheran Church in America in 1918, so that % growth is not falsely inflated (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).  
<sup>m</sup> To calculate percent growth of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., "Negro churches" were included in 1916 membership for the National Baptist Convention and excluded from the Northern Baptist Convention 1916 membership (Bureau of the Census 1930, p. 49).

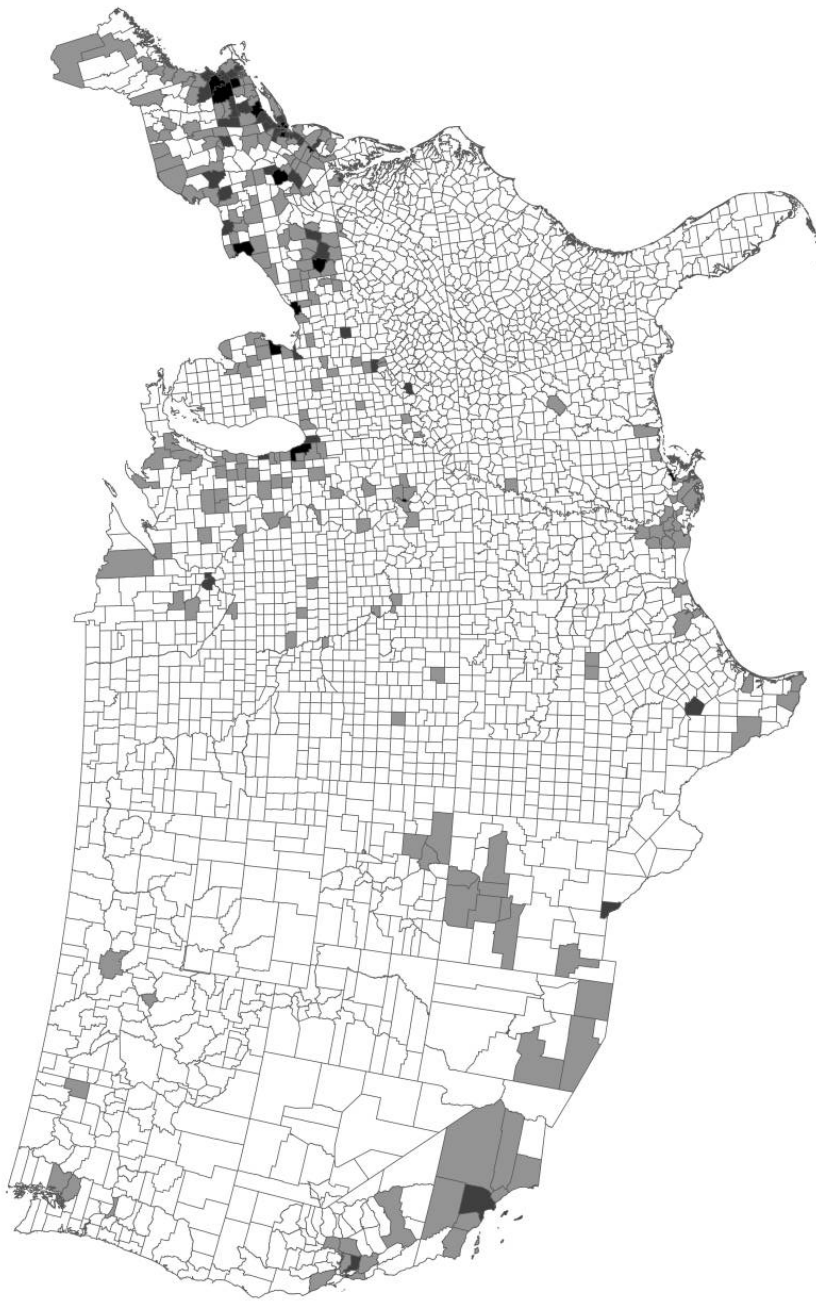


FIG. 2.—Geographic distribution of Roman Catholics, 1926 (as a percentage of total members by county)

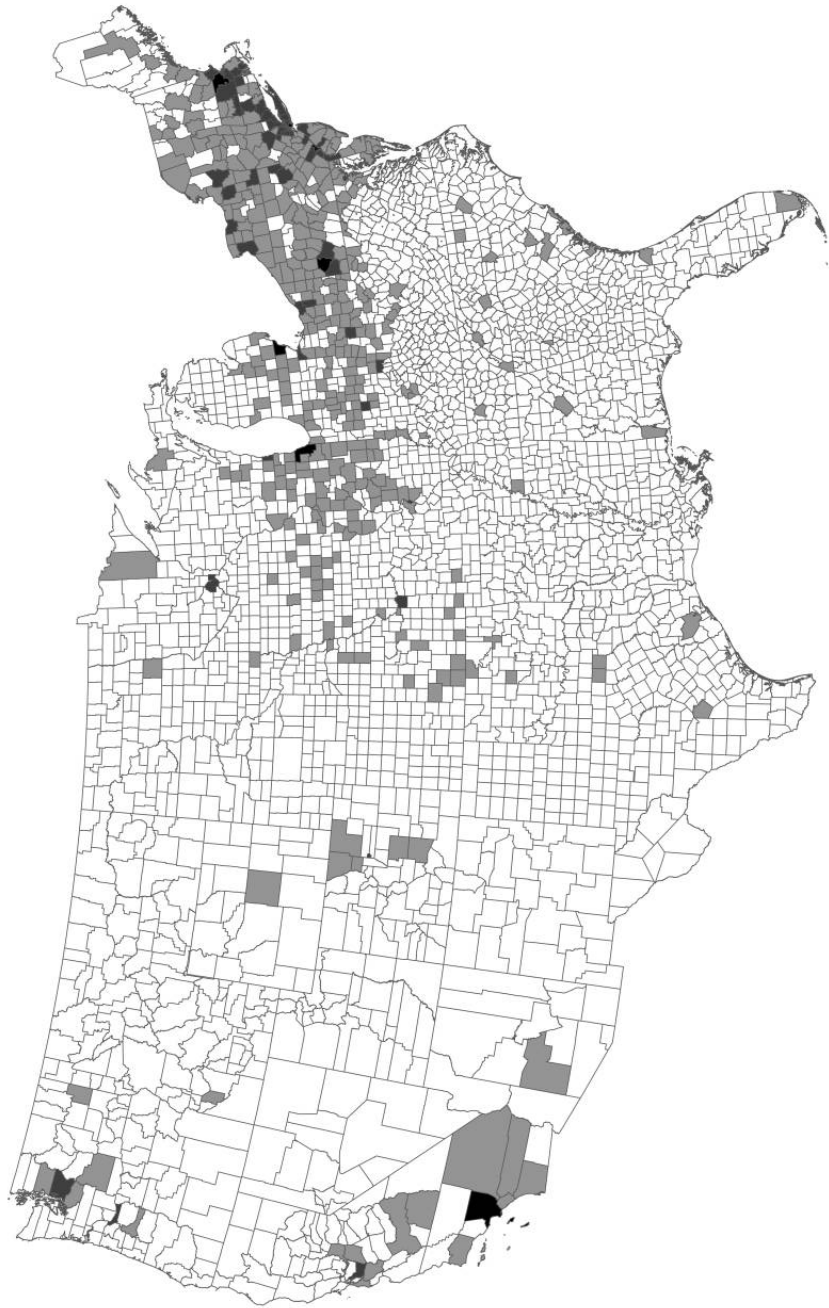


FIG. 3.—Early liberalizers, 1926 (as a percentage of total members by county)



many early liberalizers. Sanger collected data not only on the race, ethnicity, education, and other indications of class from the women who used her clinics but also on religion. The findings were pretty clear: underprivileged Catholic women would use birth control if it was made available (*Birth Control Review* 1929; Lilien 1929; Marion 1929; Robinson 1930; Yarros 1931; Wiggam 1935).

Convinced, the early liberalizers began making calls for the legalization of birth control, which often sounded like the following the third-place-winning sermon from the 1928 AES competition: “Knowledge of birth control should be widely and freely disseminated, so that among certain groups in our civilization there may be not more, but fewer and better children” (Bishop 1929, pp. 343–44).

Of course, this sermon was not an official statement by the Congregationalists. That would take another two years to transpire. And, as table 2 indicates, many denominations that did not officially liberalize had pastors submit sermons to the AES competition. What set the early liberalizers apart from these other denominations was the way in which their concerns about race suicide combined with their clear, undaunted belief in the rightness and importance of the social gospel—a belief that led them to have deep concerns about poverty, war, and social injustice and, crucially, compelled them to take steps to address these problems.

### Devout Social Gospellers

The early liberalizers deeply believed that social activism was a necessary part of being a good Christian. For these social gospellers, a focus on individual salvation was “not enough,” as the *Congregationalist* insisted (Chalmers 1931, p. 959). The reason was that, as the Universalists put it, “The Kingdom” would come “not by divine magic” but from “sacrificial activity” (Hoyt 1930, p. 370). This point was often emphasized in strong messianic tones, as in the following quote from *Presbyterian Magazine*: “Organized Christianity . . . cannot rest satisfied with a mere improvement of the existing social order. . . . The Christian ideal [is] . . . the Kingdom of God widened and extended until all men and all interests, everywhere, are brought beneath its sway—‘Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven’” (McDowell 1931, p. 335).

This same article enumerated the “urgent social questions” social gospellers sought to address “wealth and poverty, luxury and want, capital and labor, peace and war” (McDowell 1931, p. 335). As this list suggests, much of the movement’s focus was on the perceived injustice of the modern industrial system. Part and parcel of their critique of industrialism, social gospellers focused on urban problems, the “abnormal congestion of populations in cities” that had created “a series of problems in America with

## Religion and Birth Control Reform

which we have yet found no effective way to cope” (Marquis 1925, pp. 543–44). Clearly aware that immigrants especially suffered from the effects of industrialization, they chronicled the problems associated with urban child labor, as did the following article from the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*: “Large numbers of children under ten years old, and some of them as young as three or four years, are employed in the manufacture of artificial flowers, in embroidery work, garment making, and other tenement occupations. . . . The artificial June roses which appear in the Fifth Avenue shops are made by the baby fingers of Italian children, who are paid twenty cents a gross” (1924b, p. 221).

Given their concerns about the plight of immigrants and the urban poor, some social gospelers (but not all, as will become clear in the section on the silent denominations) concluded that birth control was essential to eliminating poverty. For example, articles in the Protestant Episcopal Church’s the *Living Church* asserted that “anyone who has had anything to do with social service work will heartily endorse . . . birth control” (1930, p. 580).

However, although their support for birth control was driven by concerns about urban poverty, their support for it was also deeply racialized. Take, for example, the following quote from the *Congregationalist*, which begins with a typical social gospel critique of inequality and class privilege but soon moves to discussions of “quality”:

For many years the wealthy and the educated classes have profited by modern knowledge of contraceptive methods and techniques.

. . . *Why must this knowledge remain a class privilege?* . . . How long are we going to allow the unreflective and helpless mass production of the weakest and least fit of our population to continue without attempting to shift the emphasis from quantity to quality?

. . . When and how are . . . ministers and physicians going to be allowed to give this priceless information to these unfortunate people who need it most? (Thompson 1932, p. 1037)

In the end, their eugenic beliefs merged with the progressive Christianity of the social gospel movement into a single cohesive belief system. This is perhaps nowhere as elegantly exemplified as it was in a sermon to a Methodist Episcopal Church that was submitted to the 1926 AES competition: In his sermon, the Reverend Rufus C. Baker told his congregation at the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that “the problems confronted by the Church and by the Eugenicists are the same, the motive is the same. United their program is complete. Co-operative effort will accomplish the task. And the result will be a new Humanity and a new earth, which is, in reality, the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Reverend Rufus C. Baker, 1926, “Methodist Sermon on Eugenics,” AES papers, box 13, folder “Baker, Rufus C. 1926,” APS.

THE UNOFFICIAL SUPPORTERS

In contrast to the nine denominations that did officially liberalize, whose leaders believed in both the social gospel and eugenics, four denominations tried to pick a middle ground by expressing (often quite strong) support for birth control but refraining from making that support official. For example, the Northern Baptist Convention published 16 supportive articles on birth control between 1929 and 1931 but never made an official pronouncement.

Undaunting Belief in Eugenics

Their reluctance to make an official pronouncement was certainly not a result of ambivalence about eugenics. With periodicals that emphasized the importance of the Anglo race to the nation and expressed deep concern about the country's declining racial stock, these denominations were even more eugenicist than some of the early liberalizers. If a belief in eugenics was the only predictor of liberalization, not only should these denominations have been early liberalizers; they should have been first.<sup>24</sup> Instead, these denominations refrained from making official pronouncements because they were more rural denominations that were distanced from urban problems and the social gospel movement. While they saw wisdom in making contraceptive information accessible to those of lesser "racial stock" (*Baptist* 1930), they failed to see such pronouncements as their religious duty.

Without a doubt, the Northern Baptist Convention stands out for its support for eugenics. It had more members on the AES Committee than any other denomination (see table 2), and its periodical the *Baptist* frequently reported on and expressed support for the AES and eugenic principles and beliefs in general.<sup>25</sup> For example, in 1925 the *Baptist* matter-of-factly informed its readers that "through the committee on cooperation with clergymen," the AES would "bring to the attention of the churches the

<sup>24</sup> This is true with the exception of the Evangelical Synod of North America. Its periodical, the *Evangelical Herald* discussed eugenics less frequently, with only one clearly pro-eugenics article published during the peak years of discussion. Correspondingly, it was the most hesitant to offer its support for birth control, not doing so until 1931, and only in one article. However, both articles left little room for interpretation. The article on race suicide was concerned lest "families of good blood die out" (*Evangelical Herald*, 1929, p. 685), and the article on birth control was clear in its support, recommending that "the birth control movement and the recent report of the Federal Council Committee on Marriage and the Home should be considered and studied" and promoting "intelligent, pure, reverent sex information, of which birth control, in the best sense of the term, is but the climax" (1931, p. 363).

<sup>25</sup> The *Baptist* published approximately one article per year between 1929 and 1931 promoting eugenics or the AES (*Baptist* 1929b, 1930; Beyl 1929).

message of eugenics" (1925*b*, p. 738). Likewise, the *United Presbyterian* argued that "there is no doubt that the influences of heredity are tremendous" and reminded readers that "blood will tell. Children inherit many of the characteristics and tendencies of their ancestors, not only of their own fathers and mothers, but of those farther back along the ancestral line" (1929, p. 10).

Like the early liberalizers, these denominations were deeply concerned about race suicide. An article in the *Baptist* in 1924 criticized "successful individuals" who "place ambition, ease, luxury, and freedom of travel before marriage and rearing a family. They are practicing race suicide" (1924, p. 286). In an article that quoted the father of eugenics, Francis Galton, the *Evangelical Herald* decried the use of birth control by "cultured classes" because it "seriously interferes with the progress of race culture and to that extent is a sin against church and state because through it too many families of good blood die out and the burden of progress in civilization is shifted to shoulders least able to bear it" (1929, p. 683).

Of course, concerns about race suicide were deeply intertwined with negative views of immigrants. But, in contrast to the early liberalizers, who tended not to differentiate much between types of immigrants, the unofficial supporters emphasized the undesirability of "new" immigrants. The reason was likely that the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Norwegian Lutheran Church, and the United Presbyterian Church of North America all seemed to have fairly strong identities as immigrant churches. Thus, they emphasized the differences between their ancestors and the current cohort of immigrants, arguing, for example, as did the *Evangelical Herald*, that "a tremendous change has come over the character of the immigrant. Formerly the finest class of Europeans came over, now some of the worst class come over" (Lehmann 1924, p. 41).

These concerns about class and character were racialized—geographic and ethnic differences were often also mentioned. After reminding its readers that "we have been talking for years about the perils of immigration," the *United Presbyterian* told its readers that "immigrants largely come, not as formerly, from western and northern Europe, but from eastern and southern Europe and from Asia." The same article went on to stress that these new immigrants were a safety concern, a political concern, and last but not least, also a religious, or "spiritual" concern for the nation. "A large part of our lawlessness and our crime are perpetrated by these people. They regard liberty as license to do what they wish. They do not value our institutions or our spirit. We ask, How can we incorporate such a heterogeneous mass into a political and spiritual unity?" (1925, p. 4). Echoing the political (and ethnic) concerns expressed in the quote above, another *United Presbyterian* article argued that new immigrants had already destroyed American society, character, and institutions:

The vast alien invasion of our shores destroyed our distinctive American character, perverted our institutions, displaced American labor from its rightful position and gave America its present evil fame as the most lawless nation in the world. Sicilians and aliens of that type have built America's underworld and have made gangland a power before which even Federal authority, our chief executive being the spokesman, has confessed itself helpless and undone. (Marlin 1932, p. 2)

As the mention of "Sicilians" above suggests, these periodicals often mentioned the new immigrants' "inferior" racial, ethnic, or genetic characteristics. In an article that mentioned "under-sized" folk, the *Lutheran Church Herald* emphasized that "the Norwegians [who immigrate] . . . are very different from the people [from] . . . Eastern and Southern Europe. They are not the middlemen, the sweatshop workers, the peddlers, the petty tradesmen, the under-sized, dazed-looking, excitable, illiterate folk from the agricultural and town slums of the south and east who pour into the slums of America each year under the 3 per cent law in sufficient numbers to populate a good-sized city" (1924, p. 453). The article then went on to assert that newer immigrants "have all had an equal chance, as has everyone in America," but "weren't born equal in intelligence or ability. Consequently the bulk of the Northwestern European immigrants have become a part of America while the bulk of the Southeastern European immigrants have remained Southeastern Europeans" (p. 453).

Their belief that superior genetic material was restricted to Anglo-Saxons was supported, they argued, by the crucial role Anglo-Saxons played in the founding and settling of the United States. The *United Presbyterian* argued,

The missionary value of all men is not the same. Men are born equal in their rights, but they are not equal in their fitness and ability to serve. They vary in their talents and powers. . . .  
. . . God needed the white Anglo-Saxon race. . . .  
. . . In the discovery and colonization of America, God was opening the way for the Anglo-Saxon people, imbued with the spirit of the evangelical gospel, to become a great nation.  
. . . Deep-seated in the mind and plan of God, lay the Anglo-Saxon race and country, America, strategic in position, powerful and rich in numbers and wealth. (Hutchison 1930, p. 4)

Of course one of the most significant differences between the immigrants of old and new was their religion, something that did not escape the notice of these denominations. The *Lutheran Herald* wrote that "the newcomers bring with them their particular forms of faith" (Stub 1931, p. 39). All these denominations kept close track of the American Roman Catholic Church's growth. The *Evangelical Herald* published a two-part article doing so

(Enders 1922a, 1922b). The *Baptist* variously reported that Detroit was “more than half” Catholic (Lovett 1929, p. 1448), that conditions were “even more appalling” in New York and Chicago (Gleiss 1924, p. 57), and informed readers that the Catholic population had grown from 600,000 to 17,616,000 in the past 100 years (*Baptist* 1925a, p. 219).

Given how quickly the Catholic population was growing and how little Protestant denominations admitted approaching them, if at all, in conversion efforts,<sup>26</sup> these denominations expressed concern about their political futures, asserting, for example, as did the *Evangelical Herald*, that “there is very good reason to fear the election of a Roman Catholic president” (1924, p. 497).

In sum, like the early liberalizers, these four denominations were eugenicists who were concerned about immigrants, immigrants’ greater fertility, and the threat it posed for their political power. In other words, they were deeply concerned about race suicide. However, unlike the early liberalizers, these four denominations could not bring themselves to actually make an official pronouncement. What separated these three denominations from the early liberalizers was their rejection of the social gospel.

#### Doubting the Social Gospel

None of these denominations were strong social gospellers. The *United Presbyterian* and the *Lutheran Church Herald* mentioned the social gospel only once during the time period of our analysis, and the *Evangelical Herald* only indirectly. The *United Presbyterian* asserted that while “there is an important place for the ‘social gospel,’ . . . individual conviction and conversion is the primary thing, and it needs to be kept in the *first place*” (1931, p. 6; emphasis in original). The *Lutheran Church Herald* cautioned its readers:

The social gospel has confronted the modern church with a tremendous obligation in which there inheres a great peril. In a word, that peril can be stated thus: How can the Church function to make the social order Christian without ceasing to be a church? How can religion effectively apply its sanctions to the ideals of social morality without losing its character as religion? Such questions open up a vast problem. One thing, we may be assured, the Church must not do, on peril of losing its own soul—that is to make itself a political partisan agency on behalf of any cause, however ideal and desirable. (1931, p. 357)

In a pretty clear criticism of religious activism, the *Evangelical Herald* asserted that “the millennium is not in sight because national prohibition has been

<sup>26</sup> The *Baptist* acknowledged in 1929 that “we were not Americanizing them, nor did we care to” (McAllister 1929, p. 72).

secured, and even if the new laws are rigidly enforced everywhere poverty and disease, vice and crime, corrupt politics, insanity and feeble-mindedness will still remain. The kingdom of God, that is, the reign of God in the affairs and relationships of men, is brought about not by legislation" (1919, p. 1).

Although the data presented on table 3 are not precise enough to demonstrate this definitively (any county with more than 2,000 people was counted as urban in the 1926 census), figure 4 suggests that these midwestern denominations were much more rural than the early liberalizers. This, in and of itself, meant that these groups were much more distant from the problems of urban industrialization that predominated in the Northeast and were the focus of social gospelers.

However, while the rural and midwestern location of these denominations was obviously crucial, it would be misleading to reduce the explanation for these groups' rejection of the social gospel to such geographic factors alone. Being less northeastern and more rural was also likely correlated with a lower educational and class status.

That all of these factors were important is suggested by what for some will be the surprising presence of the Northern Baptist Convention in the category of denominations that were not strong social gospelers. Although the convention possessed a "small but influential Social Gospel minority" (White and Hopkins 1976, p. 36), including key social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, the *Baptist* took a middle ground about the movement, asking to be delivered from "any gospel that is not both and completely saving and social" (1929a, p. 214; see also Wells 1930). The convention had "a large rural membership" (May 1949, p. 190), and its members were the "least-educated" of American Protestants (Pope 1948, p. 88).<sup>27</sup>

As a result, and despite their deep fears about race suicide and its political and racial implications, the Northern Baptists saw birth control as an issue that "every individual must ultimately face and settle" himself, as the *Baptist* argued: "Only indirectly are religious issues involved. Primarily they are social and economic, and the religious element must be determined not upon authority" (1931, p. 425). In contrast to the social gospelers, who saw addressing social and economic issues not only as within the purview of religion but as a religious duty, Northern Baptists and the other unofficial supporters saw birth control as an individual decision, albeit with important racial implications. They thus chose to offer only unofficial support to their more activist fellow religious leaders.

<sup>27</sup> Pope does not distinguish between Northern and Southern Baptists. Although Northern Baptists were most likely better educated than Southern Baptists, there is no question that they remained less educated than other Protestants and were not a part of the Protestant establishment (Baltzell 1964).

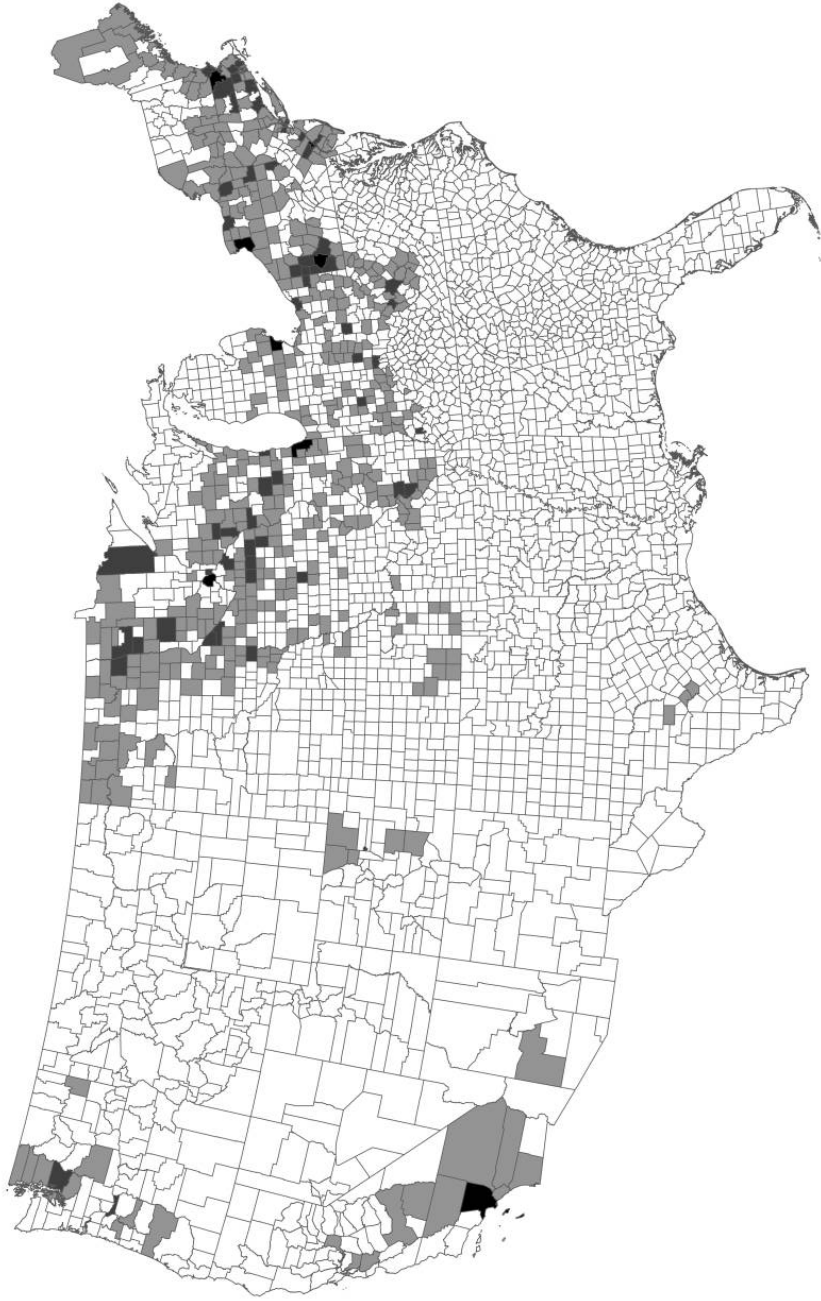


FIG. 4.—Unofficial supporters (as a percentage of total members by county)



THE CRITICS

Of course, support was far from the only stance denominations could make at this time. Six of the largest American religious denominations openly criticized the early liberalizers and the denominations that supported them. As figure 1 indicates, all the critics rejected both the social gospel and race suicide concerns. However, while they had these two crucial qualities in common, the reasons behind these beliefs, particularly their rejection of race suicide, were almost diametrically opposed into two groups.

The first group of critics were mostly immigrant denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and Orthodox Jews. Aware that immigrants and their large families were the targets of eugenicists, they rejected the assumptions inherent to the eugenics movement. Still outsiders in America, as was the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, none of these groups were a part of the Protestant establishment and were so distant from the social gospel movement that they rarely felt the need to mention it.

While immigrant critics were predominantly situated in the Northeast alongside the early liberalizers and unofficial supporters, the other group of critical denominations lived in the South. Devout eugenicists who benefited from the institutionalization of racial differences via Jim Crow, these groups were insulated from the numerical and political concerns that obsessed their northern counterparts and openly admitted that they were not concerned about race suicide.

Together, the wide variety of groups that criticized birth control reform demonstrates the importance of the factors discussed so far, particularly the importance of race suicide concerns, and not simply belief in eugenics.

Immigrant Critics: Aware That They Were the Targets

Without question the most outspoken and visible critic of birth control (Underwood 1957; Tentler 2004), the Roman Catholic Church accused eugenicists of being racists who were “preaching ‘race suicide’” (J.W.K. 1925, p. 306) and classism (Howard 1930). Articles in *America* questioned eugenicists’ arguments (Walsh 1924), the use of “science,” and especially eugenicists’ emphasis on heredity over environment (Benedik 1924). They leave little doubt that Catholics saw eugenics as thinly (or not even) veiled anti-Catholicism. For example, one article in *America* directly accused eugenicists of trying to shut “out the immigrants from Italy [and] Poland” because they “were the Catholics who had large families and were the chief contributors to the growth of the Catholic population in the United States” (Murphy 1925, p. 373).

However, although they might not have been as well known for it, immigrant-rich groups shared Catholic skepticism of race suicide and eu-

genics, even those who were Anglo-Saxon Protestants (if not yet middle-class), such as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.<sup>28</sup> In fact, as was the case for Catholics, it was difficult to find quotes that criticized birth control without criticizing eugenics among both Lutherans and Orthodox Jews. The *Lutheran Witness* variously referred to eugenicists as “quacks and unscrupulous propagandists of birth control” (Sommer 1935*b*, p. 114) and “the little band of professors and men and women busybodies” who were futilely “trying to apply to the human race . . . artificial stock-breeding rules” (Sommer 1935*a*, p. 299). One *Lutheran Witness* article dismissed eugenicists’ promotion of smaller families as “hot air” and argued that “a favorite slogan of those sponsoring the artificial limiting of families is: ‘Fewer children, but better ones.’ . . . Between the size of families and the goodness of the children there is no relation at all” (Graebner 1931, p. 120).

Orthodox Jews criticized “Anglo-Saxon and other supremacy claims” (Burstein 1924, p. 784) and condemned birth control and eugenics in the same breath in their periodical the *Jewish Forum*: “Much could be said of the wisdom of the Bible on the subject of eugenics, and of its attitude on birth control. We scientists may justly condemn the extravagant opinions of some so-called preachers of the gospel, who actually rush in and air their views on a medical and scientific subject where—not the angels but—physicians and men of science fear to tread” (Macht 1931, p. 380).

Even the Mormons, who were not immigrants and not often eugenicists’ targets, but were culturally marginal nonetheless, criticized eugenicists. Emphasizing pride in the fact that Mormons were the “most composite people in the most composite nation in the world,” one Mormon writer asserted, “It is by no means an accident that the greatest nations of the past and of the present are of a mixed blood” (Evans 1924, p. 131).

These outsider-immigrant critics were joined by groups that might seem like extremely unlikely allies, including the vehemently anti-Catholic Southern Baptist Convention. To understand how these unlikely bedfellows came together, we must understand how racial concerns differed between the North and the South such that whites in the North were concerned about Catholic immigrants destroying their race and nation but whites in the South viewed them as possible eugenic helpmates.

### Southern Critics: The Geography of Race Suicide

Figure 5 demonstrates that for the most part, non-Catholic critics lived outside of the Northeast and that a large portion lived in the South. With

<sup>28</sup> Pope argued that “the Lutheran denominations are harder to classify, because of their closer association with farmers, with particular ethnic backgrounds, and with skilled workers,” but were generally similar to Catholics, if much more rural (1948, p. 89).

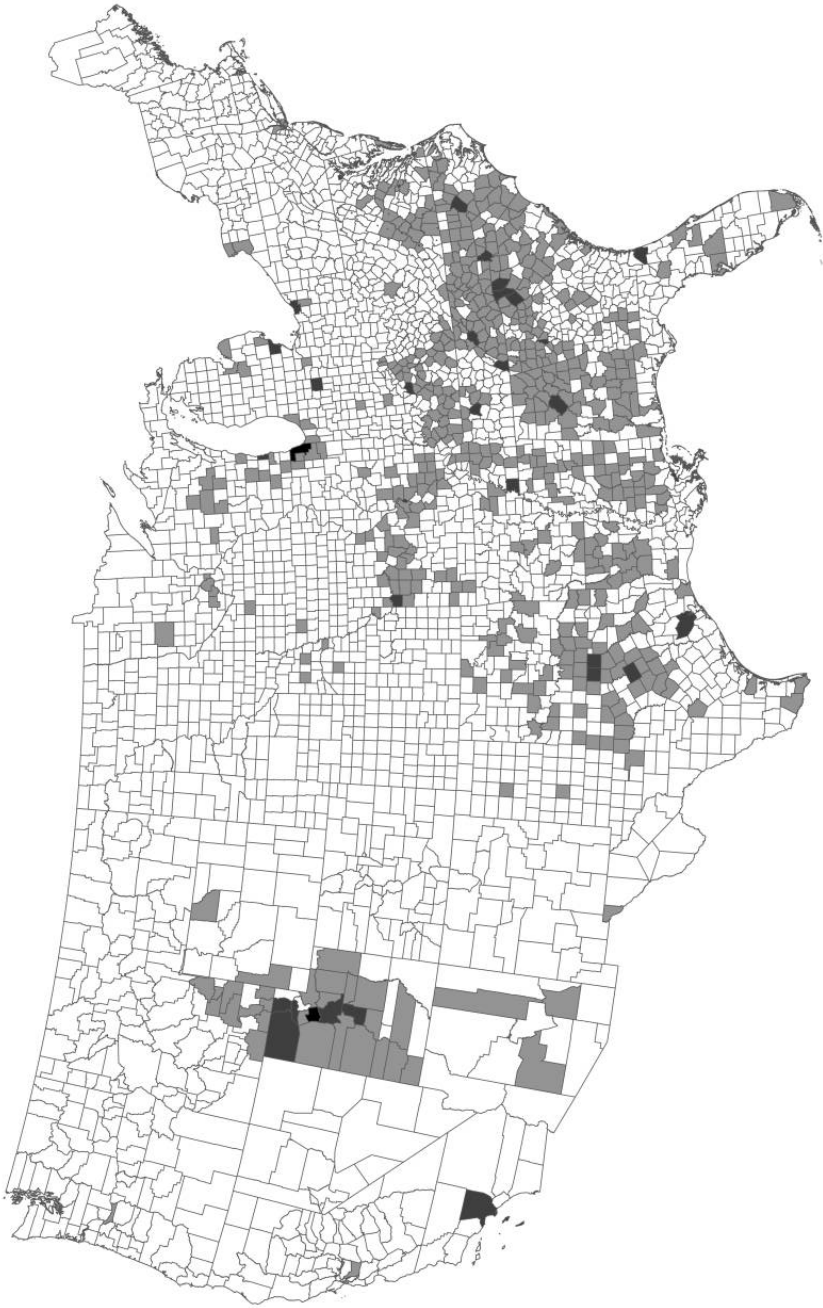


FIG. 5.—Critics (as a percentage of total members by county; Roman Catholics are excluded)

high birthrates and living where “the only socially inferior race was clearly separated by the accident of color” as eugenicist Prescott F. Hall wrote in 1919 (p. 125), southern white denominations tended to be quite devoted to beliefs in white superiority and supportive of eugenic principals in general. However, as Hall also noted, “until very recently there was no immigration at all” in the South (p. 125). Furthermore, southern whites had higher birthrates than northern whites, and, more important, birthrates that were higher than or equivalent to southern blacks.<sup>29</sup> In combination, these factors created religious denominations that were devoted to eugenics in relationship to blacks but were relatively unconcerned about immigration or immigrant birthrates. Instead, they argued that immigrants would “save the country from stock deterioration” (Sparthey 1925, p. 715).

That they were eugenicists was blatantly obvious in both the Southern Baptist Convention’s newspaper the *Christian Index* and the Presbyterian Church in the United States’ periodical *Presbyterian Survey*. For example, the *Christian Index* asserted, “We must seek through eugenics and eugenics to improve the bodies of men, through education, the minds of men; through religion, the morals of men” (Mullins 1924, p. 7). A *Presbyterian Survey* article emphasized the importance of “family traits and tendencies inherited from their forefathers” (Cartledge 1931, p. 554).

However, while vehement eugenicists, southern groups were less critical of immigrants than many other eugenicist groups. For example, one *Presbyterian Survey* article asserted, “It is not true that we receive the ‘Scum of the earth,’ for the so-called ‘scum’ seldom has the ambition to emigrate” (Harkness 1925, p. 390). Another article in the same periodical went so far as to argue that

The student of eugenics and social science knows that our “primitive” American stock is rapidly passing away . . . the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic stock. America is the most heterogeneous country in the world. Its population is becoming more and more complex. . . . We think it will save the country from stock deterioration.

The history of the great nations of antiquity indicates that their downfall was largely due to the decay of the stock—new blood was lacking in the veins of the old weakened race. . . . The foreign-born population of America will be its saviour . . . making it stronger. (Sparthey 1925, p. 715)

<sup>29</sup> A 1917 article in *Scientific Monthly* titled “Race Suicide” presented data that showed that southern urban whites’ birth rate was 25% higher than southern urban blacks (378 vs. 296 children under five years of age per 1,000 women ages 15–44). In southern rural areas, both were extremely high (678 vs. 689) (Thompson 1917, p. 24). In comparison, the same article noted that in the north, “native white women of native parentage . . . had borne an average of 2.5 children, while the white women of foreign parentage had borne an average of 4.5 children (p. 23).

Of course, immigrants could “save the race” only if their religion was “fixed,” because these groups were deeply anti-Catholic, as the *Index* openly admitted: “We Protestants are crowded in with Catholics, and they get on our nerves” (Herring 1924, p. 20). Thus, while the early liberalizers worked on curtailing immigration and immigrant fecundity, southern groups discussed them primarily as a missionary responsibility. For example, a *Presbyterian Survey* article that continually conflated ethnicity and religion with a focus on Italians urged readers to “press on with undaunted courage and unflinching sacrifice to the goal of making America Christian by winning the immigrant to Christ” (1925, p. 354). Likewise, as a *Christian Index* article urged, “Of foreigners in our Southland there are four million. They have come seeking liberty from oppression, and relief from poverty. They swarm our streets, work in our mines, commercialize our fruits, mend our shoes, open laundries and go far in breaking down our Sabbath. If we do not evangelize and train them, they will do us a great injury” (1925, p. 17).

However, while Roman Catholics were a religious problem, they were not a racial problem. The *Presbyterian Survey* did not mention race suicide or differential birthrates once during the eight years for which their periodical was examined (1919–20, 1925, and 1930–35). This does not seem to have been a result of a lack of familiarity with the term. For example, the *Christian Index* published three articles in the four years for which we were able to obtain the periodical that vaguely suggested the existence of differential birthrates and demonstrated an awareness of the issue particularly for those in the North. For example, one of these articles listed the names of some recent (presumably white) parents and proclaimed happily, “We note with pleasurable satisfaction that Atlanta does not believe in race suicide. Recently we had nineteen babies in the hospital at one time” (*Christian Index* 1924, p. 28).

In sum, and consistent with racial formation theories (Omi and Winant 1986), in the North, where white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were more concerned about being overtaken by Catholic immigrants, religion took on decidedly more racialized terms. In the South, whites had racial privilege based on a firmly established, state-sponsored, culturally accepted, and rigidly enforced color line. There, the religious difference between them and immigrants was, if anything, more a rallying cry for proselytization than a justification for keeping immigrants from coming into the country and reproducing.

However, while the reasons behind their lack of concern about race suicide among both the immigrant and southern denominations could not have been more different, their shared rejection of it led them to the same solution: they openly opposed birth control, as long as they also rejected, or at the very least were completely removed from, the social gospel.

Immigrants' and Southern White Denominations' Distance  
from the Social Gospel

Immigrant denominations seemed almost completely out of the loop regarding the social gospel movement. Neither the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Jews, nor the Mormons mentioned the social gospel once in the more than seven years of periodical analysis conducted for each of them. The *Lutheran Witness* mentioned it only once, in an extremely dismissive tone (Sommer 1934).

In contrast to the immigrant denominations that simply seemed disconnected from the social gospel movement, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in the United States knew all too well what sorts of social activism were required by the movement and expressed very strong views against the social gospel. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention asserted that “the times are prolific of the ways in which men may be saved. There is salvation by eugenics and salvation by social service. There is salvation by talking spirits and salvation by pleasant thoughts. There is salvation by legislation and salvation by sanitation. But there is, in fact only one salvation. There is no other way but Jesus” (Dawson 1924, p. 30).

With strong feelings against the social gospel movement (or a lack of engagement with it at all) and a rejection of race suicide concerns (because they were outsiders or immigrants themselves or were whites living in the South), this disparate living in the South), this disparate group of denominations ended up finding consensus around one important belief: birth control reform did not make sense racially, or religiously.

THOSE WHO REMAINED SILENT

Nine religious denominations were completely silent about birth control throughout the 1930s, usually until the early 1960s. Not tightly concentrated in the Northeast (see fig. 6), all these denominations were unconcerned about race suicide. Correspondingly, most of these groups openly criticized eugenicists' beliefs and principles and looked favorably on immigration and immigrants. As believers in the social gospel, these denominations had identities as religious activists. With their fellow religious activists promoting religious activism on birth control for reasons they could not support, silence became their safest course of action.

Marginal Ethnicities — Skeptical of Eugenics

Not surprisingly, the majority of the denominations that remained silent on birth control had racial or ethnic backgrounds that were more marginal than the early liberalizers or unofficial supporters and that pushed them to

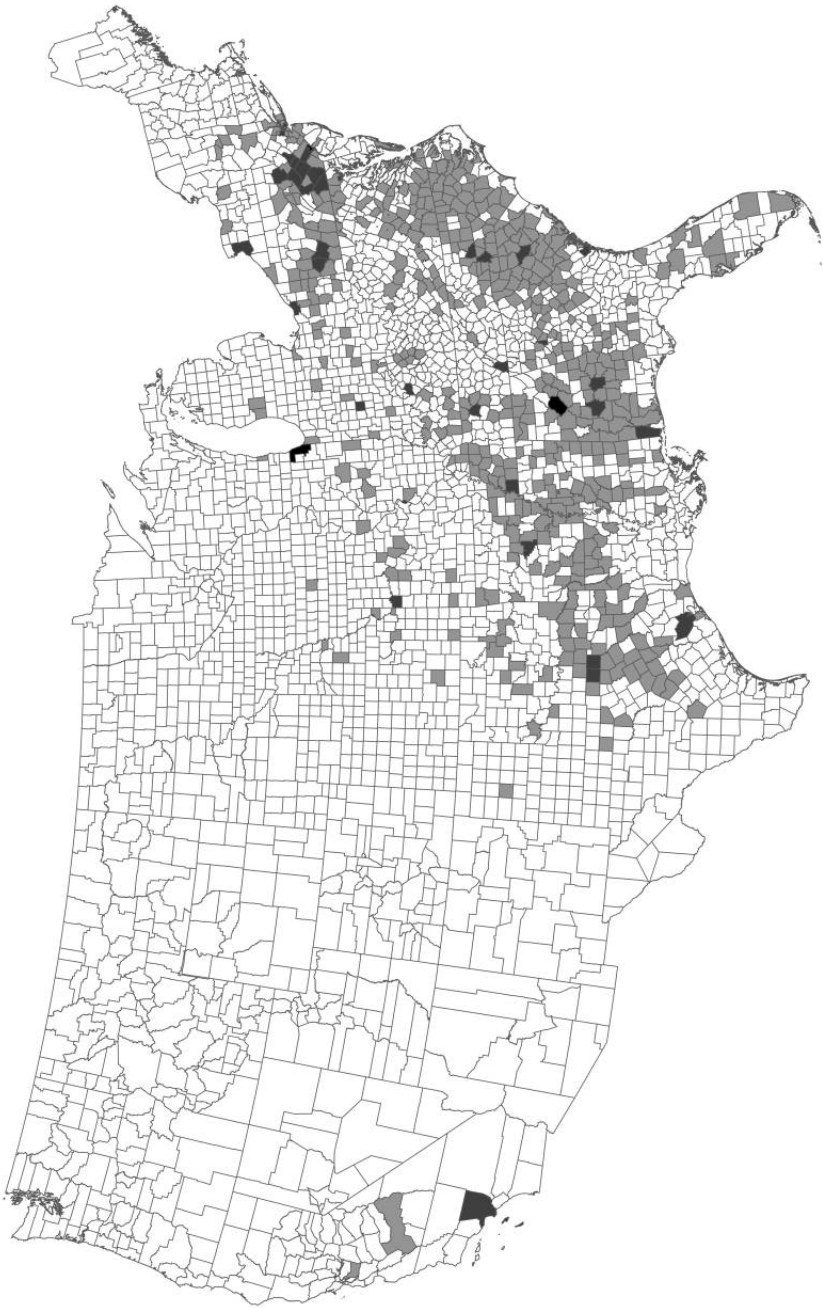


FIG. 6.—Silent groups (as a percentage of total members by county)

be critical of eugenics.<sup>30</sup> Both traditionally black denominations were openly critical of eugenics. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church asserted, “To go back to the assertion that your fathers’ character at the time of your birth will be yours also sounds very much like fatalism. The idea is antagonistic to progress. If the assertion were true, then there would be no advance in civilization. . . . Let the Christian get away from heredity. Heredity! What is heredity?” (Evans 1925, pp. 10–11). The National Baptist Convention USA countered survival of the fittest arguments, arguing that “corporation, not conflict is the law of progress” and that “those who learn to work together survive and grow strong; those who are always fighting inevitably destroy each other” (*National Baptist Union Review* 1931, p. 2).

Criticism of eugenicists was definitely not limited to the African-American denominations, however, as almost every other denomination that was silent on birth control also criticized eugenicist views. Although statistics on the percentage of their members that were foreign born are unfortunately not available for any denominations at this time, this was particularly true for those groups whose periodicals suggested that they still had a strong identity as recent immigrants (the Reformed Church in the United States, the United Lutheran Church in America, and Conservative Jews).

These groups rejected or criticized eugenicists’ focus on heredity and especially their focus on nature over nurture. Of all these denominations, the Reformed Church in the United States was by far the strongest critic, publishing eight articles that were critical of eugenics in 1924 alone.<sup>31</sup> In quote after quote, the *Reformed Church Messenger* emphasized the importance of environment over heredity: “Parents have little control over heredity. They have immense control over environment. Theirs is the re-

<sup>30</sup> That is, with the exception of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The collapse of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* in 1930, just as many groups were making their pronouncements on birth control, has made coding the MECS’s position on birth control conclusively next to impossible (they could have indicated unofficial support or open criticism of birth control reform at any point in the next year and a half after the journal collapsed, or they could have simply remained silent, there is no way to know for certain in the absence of a periodical). Their more positive views of immigrants and lack of concern about race suicide are generally consistent with the position of other white groups from the South. However, they do not seem to have been eugenicists. The only article that touched on eugenics asserted that although physical descent matters, we determine the “growth or retardation” of our children (Hammond 1924, p. 624). As the only white southern denomination that was a strong social gospeler, its silence is consistent with the positions of the silent denominations presented in this section and with the overall argument presented in the article, but given these data limitations, we do not focus on the MECS as evidence for any of our claims.

<sup>31</sup> See Barnett (1924), Blemker (1924), Deer (1924a), Kern (1924), “Parents—Stop, Look and Listen!” (1924a), “Put the Accent on Evangelism” (1924b), “Religion in the Home” (1924c), and Schaeffer (1924). The year 1924 was not unique for this periodical. In 1931 it published six articles that were critical of eugenics.



sponsibility of providing the best possible home atmosphere and environment for the children to grow up in" (1924c, p. 4).

Like its articles on juvenile delinquency, the *Reformed Church Messenger's* articles on immigration made strong statements about immigration reform in general, particularly in an article titled "Race Prejudice and the Immigrant," in which it argued that "instead of an impartial, fair and just consideration of the needs of the country, the determining factors [of immigration reform] were politics and racial prejudice" and went on to criticize the "gospel of the intrinsic superiority of the native-born American (and all Americans—with the exception of the Indians—were at one time foreigners) [and] its racial discrimination against the non-Nordic nationalities" (Spinka 1925, p. 7).

Other denominations with strong immigrant identities expressed similar sentiments. Mordecai Kaplan, leader of the Conservative Jewish movement, well-known for recruiting recent Jewish immigrants, wrote that Jews had "a strong antipathy against any attempt, be it scientific or religious, to make out a case for inherent distinctions between races and peoples" (1929, p. 10).

The United Lutheran Church in America's the *Lutheran* insisted that "the vast majority of the present-day immigrants are good, clean, industrious Christian men and women" (Freas 1930, p. 8) and harshly criticized eugenicist reasoning in another article:

You can take the baby son of respectable parents and put him in an environment where he becomes a thief, and you can take the son of thieves and make him a bank president. It is up to you and the environment with which you surround him. In other words . . . "Train up a child in the way in which he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

. . . What will do wonders to make much talk about heredity look like "bunk" is Christian training, Christian discipline. That is the bedrock upon which character is built. (1927, p. 13)

In separate articles the Reformed Church in America's *Christian Intelligencer* urged readers, "Don't make the immigrant hate America. Make him love America. In other words, be an American,—and be a Christian" (1930, p. 245) and declared, "The Interpreter has no sympathy with the narrow views which find expression in the slogan '100 per cent American,' for both America and Americans change with the passing of the years. We shall each of us make our contribution to the ultimate nation if, regardless of the racial stock from which we individually have sprung, we do our part in making the inevitable change a development of a better America" (Demarest 1924, p. 358).

But, even those silent groups whose periodicals did not indicate strong identities as recent immigrants strongly criticized eugenics.<sup>32</sup> For example,

<sup>32</sup>The sole exceptions were the Churches of Christ, whose *Gospel Advocate* said little about social issues and nothing about eugenics, and the MECS, whose *Methodist Quarterly Review* collapsed in 1930.

before concluding insistently that “God is the judge of racial equality, not America!,” the Disciples of Christ’s urged readers of *World Call* to offer “sincere, wholesome friendship” to immigrants (Butchart 1924, p. 24).

#### Belief in the Social Gospel: At Odds with Fellow Religious Activists

Many of the silent denominations were as adamant about the social gospel as the early liberalizers. For example, the *Reformed Church Messenger* dismissed personal religious devotion disconnected from social reform, arguing that “effort to bring the social, political and industrial relationships of men into harmony with the standards set by the Lord Jesus Himself” glorifies God (Schaeffer 1924, p. 30).

The Disciples of Christ’s periodical *World Call* was emphatic about promoting the social gospel, declaring that it sought to “inspire activity in the social gospel, to promote every form of church activity that touches social welfare, to . . . promote social justice and . . . bring in peace where there is strife, brotherhood where there is conflict, justice where there are iniquities, and good will where there is misunderstanding” (1929, p. 45).

Although they were relatively rare, there were indications that the denominations that remained silent were aware of the eugenicist views of the early liberalizers who were their fellow social gospelers. For example, the *Reformed Church Messenger* reprinted an article titled “Consequences of the Neglect of Childhood” from the much more eugenically inclined *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (Deer 1924).<sup>33</sup> The short three-week lag between the two publications indicates that there were strong connections and “affinities” between the two denominations (they merged in 1957) but also that leaders of the Reformed Church in America had ample opportunity to be made aware that Christian church leaders’ views were much more extreme than theirs.

It is perhaps no surprise then that the *Reformed Church Messenger* also published the most blunt critique of racism among its fellow social gospelers in two separate articles. The first article criticized social gospelers who were trying to bring about the “kingdom of God” via “racial prejudice” and discrimination: “*Let us take Christ and His gospel of love seriously. Racial prejudice, unfair discrimination, hatred and economic oppression, will not bring about the kingdom of God either in America or*

<sup>33</sup> Although, of course, the fact that it reprinted this article could certainly be taken as an indication that the RCUS was in favor of eugenics, which we initially concluded, the overall tone of the journal makes this unlikely and suggests that it reprinted it not because of the article’s argument that “subnormals” should be sterilized but because of this article’s argument that “these are the children who may go either up or down according to environment and training. A recent estimate was made that eighty per cent of juvenile delinquents are in this class. Herein is our hope” (Deer 1924, p. 10).

anywhere else: these always produced hell on earth. . . . The immigrant problem involves not merely transformation of the immigrant, but also, and I would say chiefly, the transformation of the American" (Spinka 1925, pp. 7–8; emphasis in original). Six years later, in 1931, as the denomination watched its fellow social gospelers liberalize on birth control, the *Messenger* reflected sardonically about the growth of eugenicist reasoning among religious leaders:

As Christians, we certainly rejoice that so much more attention is being paid today than in past centuries to methods of reclaiming and restoring the less fortunate children—who are underprivileged, defective and delinquent. It is both pathetic and tragic, however, that so much more attention is paid to physical or mental defects than to moral and spiritual shortcomings, and that so much has to be spent to pay the costs of crime because so little was spent in promoting the gospel of prevention and in sowing the good seed of truth in the hearts and minds of youth, both by precept and example. (1931, p. 4)

Harsh as it was, such criticism was relatively rare. And when it came to the contentious issue of birth control, these denominations remained silent. These religious groups were cognizant that birth control was a contentious issue in the country in general and within the religious field in particular. Deep believers in the social gospel movement but all too aware of the eugenic reasoning behind early liberalizers' stances, these denominations decided that the best thing to do regarding birth control was to say nothing at all.

## CONCLUSION

In his weekly column "Eugenics and the Church" for the AES periodical *Eugenics*, the Reverend Kenneth MacArthur, chair of the Committee for Cooperation with Clergymen, wrote, "The social ideal of the Kingdom of God on earth has been rediscovered by church leaders who are emphasizing an ideal humanity, a just and friendly world, a redeemed mankind. . . . Eugenics offers a way, consistent with Christian principles, of freeing the race in a few generations of a large proportion of the feeble-minded, the criminal, the licentious, by seeing to it . . . that persons carrying these anti-social traits shall leave behind them no tainted offspring" (1928, p. 6).

It is clear from this quote that MacArthur was hoping to convince social gospelers, perhaps because he was aware that some remained unconvinced, of the importance and righteousness of eugenics. He wanted to do so because he, like AES leaders in general, saw religious leaders as key to its education campaigns. As the announcement for its first competition for the best sermon on eugenics stated, religious leaders were essential to the AES plan to get its message to the "good people" of the "intelligent classes":

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Prizes of \$500 for the best, \$300 for the second, and \$200 for the third best sermon are the rewards. Since the churches are in a measure a natural selective agency and since a large percentage of the intelligent classes are church members, it is hoped that the message of eugenics will be received by thousands of people in the United States who otherwise would not hear it. The award should stimulate ministers to a deeper study of this subject, which has such an important bearing on the welfare of America. It has been said that good people make the churches and that the churches seldom make the people good. Even if this is so, the American Eugenics Society hopes that this award will be a help toward the increase of good people in America (*Eugenical News* 1926, p. 48).

Who were the “good people” the AES sought to increase via its outreach to religious leaders? They were educated. They were “white,” or at least “Anglo-Saxon,” as the terms were understood then. And they were also, without a doubt, Protestant. That these qualities intersected, and intersected in crucial ways, is clear in terms of who supported the AES—Anglo-Saxon Protestants (and Reform Jews)—and even clearer in terms of which of these groups ultimately supported birth control reform—the wealthiest, most urban, and most highly educated.

These findings have implications for our understandings about how religion intersects with other key structures in our society, especially race, class, and gender.

Perhaps the most obvious, and important, implication of these findings is that the first issue connected to sex and gender that really divided the American religious field was not a result of divisions regarding women’s rights or feminism. Religious groups began to promote legalizing birth control not because they were interested in promoting women’s rights but because they became convinced that making birth control legal was essential for the future of their race—critical to maintaining their political and economic advantage as racialization theories argue.

That all of this was a racial project on the part of certain elites in a certain part of the country is driven home by how European immigrants were seen in the North versus the South and further emphasized by the contradictions apparent within the broader racial views of both groups. Many of the early liberalizers were progressive, even activist, in their stances on “the Negro,” but utterly racist in their attitudes toward immigrants. Thus, the Protestant Episcopal Church heralded the Immigration Restriction Act for preventing “the further dilution of our stock, which has unquestionably been in serious danger” (Woodruff 1924, p. 468), but argued that Negroes are not an inferior race (Crosby 1932, pp. 567–68). Similarly, Congregationalists reported optimistically about eliminating the “very dangerous social malady” of racial prejudice (Hinman 1929, p. 267) and questioned data that demonstrated that “the Negro was of inferior mental and physical stock” (Clinchy 1930, pp. 170–71) while advocating eugenics (Bishop 1929).

Such contradictions did not exist for southern eugenicists whose focus was on blacks whose political or numerical threat was brutally repressed by a set of well-established institutions of racial domination. They saw Catholic immigrants as a racial boon or missionary opportunity, if they mentioned them at all.

If, as we have shown, early religious divisions about sex and gender were really about race and class, what does this mean for today? We think that it suggests that while the culture wars appear to be about the politics of sex and gender, they are also about race and class. Although it well known that mainline Protestants and Jews tend to support gay rights, abortion, and women's rights, that black Protestants and Catholics are more varied in their support from issue to issue, and that evangelicals tend to be the most conservative overall (Stensland et al. 2000; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2005), there has been little examination of how intersections of race and class might have led, or continue to contribute, to this outcome. This study is a call for more.

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