

Scientific Calvinism: Eugenics as a Secular Religion

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The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 found William Bateson (1861-1926), the celebrated English geneticist, lecturing and attending the meetings of the British Association in Melbourne and Sydney. After one such lecture a Scottish soldier approached him and said: ‘Sir, what ye’re telling us is nothing but *Scientific Calvinism*.’¹ The encounter made an impression on Bateson, who contemplated using ‘scientific Calvinism’ as a title for his Australian presidential addresses and possibly for a collection of his popular writings on genetics.² He never did.³ Nor did he use ‘scientific Calvinism’ in connection to eugenics.⁴ But there were other scientists who did. The English geneticist J.B.S. Haldane (1892-1964) was one of them. He entitled an article

¹ See *William Bateson, F.R.S. Naturalist. His Essays & Addresses together with a Short Account of His Life* (Cambridge, 1928), p. vi. According to Guido Pontecorvo (1907-1999), the Italian-born Scottish geneticist, the ‘Scottish soldier’ was none other than the playwright and surgeon James Bridie (1888-1951). See Wellcome Library, London, Guido Pontecorvo Papers, Correspondence between Pontecorvo and Professor Cyril Dean Darlington 26 November 1953, UGC198/3/1/34-1.

² G. Radick, ‘Presidential Address: Experimenting with the Scientific Past’ in *British Journal for the History of Science*, vol 49, no 2, (2016), 153-72.

³ He used it again in his “Gamete and Zygote: A Lay Discourse”—the Henry Sidgwick Memorial Lecture, he delivered at Newnham College, University of Cambridge, in 1917—to describe the “materialistic doctrine” informing speciation in plants and animals. See *William Bateson, F.R.S. Naturalist*, pp. 201- 214, esp. p. 203. See also Alan G. Cock, Donald R. Forsdyke, *Treasure Your Exceptions: The Science and Life of William Bateson* (New York, 2008), esp. pp. 448-50.

⁴ Bateson was often critical of eugenics, believing that it impacted negatively on the development of genetics. ‘The fact is,’—he noted in 1925 in a letter to Michel S. Pease (1890-1966), another Cambridge geneticist and a founding member of the Fabian Society, —‘I never feel Eugenics is my job. On and off I have definitely tried to keep clear of it. To real Genetics it is a serious—increasingly serious—nuisance diverting attention to subordinate and ephemeral issues, and giving a doubtful flavour to good materials.’ Quoted in *William Bateson, F.R.S. Naturalist. His Essays*, p. 388.

he wrote in 1929 for the October issue of *Harper's Magazine* 'Scientific Calvinism', and republished it in his book *The Inequality of Man and Other Essays* which appeared in 1932.⁵ 'Will scientific Calvinism,' asked Haldane, 'produce the same type of society and individual character as religious Calvinism? It is quite possible', he believed. In order for this transformation to happen, however, the eugenicists—whom Haldane described as devoting 'a large part of their energies to disapproving of their fellow-creatures'—needed to gain the public and political influence they so eagerly sought.⁶

Although it was popular journalism, the issues discussed in this article, particularly the idea of hereditary predestination, echoed widely among the supporters of eugenics who, almost half a century after Francis Galton (1822-1911) coined the term the term,⁷ continued to be divided over which agency was the most important in shaping human improvement: the environment (nurture) or genetic inheritance (nature). Calvinism, as is known, promotes the idea of divine predestination. Similarly, eugenics is based on the premise that one's heredity is *given* (predestined) not *made*. Although the individual may be able to correct certain 'deficiencies' through education and self-improvement he or she cannot escape the biological heritage bequeathed to him or her by parents and grandparents. Some hereditary legacies were more felicitous than others, eugenicists believed, but ultimately they are all *written* before the individual was born.

A year after the publication of Haldane's article, the question of whether eugenics could be understood as 'scientific Calvinism' was put to three American eugenicists, Albert Edward

⁵ J. B. S. Haldane, *The Inequality of Man and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1937) [first published 1932], pp. 36-50.

⁶ Haldane, *The Inequality of Man*, p. 46. Similar to Bateson, Haldane had an 'on and off' relationship with eugenics, but he was 'certain that it [had] a very great future as an ethical principle'. In Haldane, *The Inequality of Man*, p. 111.

⁷ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London, 1883), p. 25.

Wiggam (1871-1957), Frederick Osborn (1889-1981) and Leon F. Whitney (1894-1973), and their short answers were published in *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*.⁸ If Wiggam charged ‘the fatalistic position of the environmental position and the freedom and optimism of the theory of the hereditarian basis of behaviour’, Osborn chose not to endorse either position, stating instead that the ‘indefinable spiritual quality [is what] enables the individual man to make the best of his opportunities and to overcome his limitations, whether of environment or of heredity’. It was Whitney, however, who engaged more directly with the question. It was ‘possible’, he noted, ‘to argue that eugenics [...] be called “scientific Calvinism”.’ Calvinism meant ‘that a man’s spiritual fate is foreordained’, while eugenics presupposed ‘that a man’s quality and abilities [were] determined by hereditary endowment as acted upon by environment’.⁹

In their considerations of the importance of nature and nurture, these eugenicists found neither agency sufficiently stable to allow for a final pronouncement on whether eugenics was ‘scientific Calvinism’. Galton himself would have rejected ‘scientific Calvinism’ as a description for his theory of eugenics. The question ‘whether man possess[ed] any creative power of will at all, or whether his will is also predetermined by blind forces or by intelligent agencies’ was unnecessary, and he deemed the ‘unending argument’ about predestination as detrimental to the ‘practical side of eugenics’.¹⁰ In order for eugenics to ‘be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion’—as he put it in the paper he read before the Sociological Society

⁸ ‘Is Eugenics “Scientific Calvinism”? Is it Biological Predestination’ in *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*, vol 3, no 1, (1930), 18–19.

⁹ ‘Is Eugenics “Scientific Calvinism”?’, p. 19.

¹⁰ F. Galton, ‘Eugenics as a Factor in Religion’ in F. Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (London, 1909), p. 69.

in May 1904¹¹—there was need for an exploration of both morality and science, pursued simultaneously and without separating nature from nurture.¹² This is not to suggest that Galton saw eugenics as a modern secular surrogate for religion.¹³ Neither am I proposing a functionalist model that defines eugenics as a secular religion simply based on the premise that its ideological content was non-Christian or anti-Christian. Not only was eugenics rarely in open conflict with religion, it did not attempt to supplant it either. To be sure, eugenics vied with organised religion over the control of reproduction and over the social and biological role of the family, but the two shared, in fact, a common goal: to improve the health and morality of society. What I am offering here, moreover, is not a discussion of the relationship between religion and eugenics; others have achieved this very successfully.¹⁴ As one scholar aptly put it, ‘It is rare for studies of eugenics not to mention the question of religion. The ethical issues surrounding eugenic theories raised questions for religious believers, and this subject has featured prominently in the existing historiography’.¹⁵ What I propose instead is to discuss eugenics as a moral philosophy concerned with the improvement of human life, with particular reference to the late-nineteenth- and early-

¹¹ F. Galton, ‘Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims’ in F. Galton, *Essays in Eugenics*, p. 42.

¹² F. Galton, *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London, 1874). See also R. Schwartz Cowan, ‘Nature and Nurture: The Interplay of Biology and Politics in the Work of Francis Galton’ in *Studies in the History of Biology*, vol 1 (1977), 133-208.

¹³ In the way the philosopher of science defines evolution as a secular religion. See Michael Ruse, See M. Ruse, ‘Is Evolution a Secular Religion’ in *Science*, vol 299, no 5612, (2003), 1523-4.

¹⁴ For the North American context see Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York, 2004); Sharon M. Leon, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago, 2013); and Dennis L. Durst, *Eugenics and Protestant Social Reform: Hereditary Science and Religion in America, 1860-1940* (Eugene, OR, 2017). For the British context see P. T. Merricks, *Religion and Racial Progress in Twentieth-Century Britain: Bishop Barnes of Birmingham* (Basingstoke, 2017); for the European context see Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective* (London, 2014).

¹⁵ G. J. Baker, ‘Christianity and Eugenics: The Place of Religion in the British Eugenics Education and Society and the American Eugenics Society, c. 1907-1940’ in *Social History of Medicine*, vol 27, no 2, (2014), 281.

twentieth-century context. For these reasons, this article stands askew relative to the more ‘mainstream’ scholarship on eugenics¹⁶ as well as the current debates on human enhancement, which although purporting to discuss the ethical problems surrounding the legacy of eugenics, remain in large measure reticent about it.¹⁷

Any scientific movement is generally regarded as hostile to religion, but I do not believe that the terms science and religion are so mutually exclusive.¹⁸ In many respects, science and religion were not antithetical but complementary activities coupled in a synergetic relationship, one upon which Galton’s eugenic ideal was largely based. To be sure eugenics teetered on religion in various ways. Importantly, eugenics (as the offspring of Darwinism and positivism) revised the traditional Platonic-Christian model of humanity’s corporeality in which the body was devalued as fallen and corrupt and ultimately dismissed as insignificant. The Christian condemnation of the body was certainly not as extreme as some nineteenth-century positivists and evolutionary scientists suggested it to be, but there is no doubt about the renewed importance that evolutionism and modern theories of heredity in general and eugenics in particular bestowed upon the body in the establishment of a new vision of humanity.¹⁹ Just as Darwinism may be seen as challenging the hegemonic role of religion²⁰ and the biological fixity of the human

¹⁶ For example Debbie Challis, *The Archaeology of Race The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (London, 2013).

¹⁷ There is now a vast literature on the topic. See for example M. J. Selgelid, ‘Moderate Eugenics and Human Enhancement’ in *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, vol. 17, no 1, (2014), 3-12. See also N. Agar, *Liberal Eugenics: In Defence of Human Enhancement* (Malden, MA, 2004). For a different approach see M. Ekberg, ‘Eugenics: Past, Present, and Future’ in M. Turda (ed.) *Crafting Humans: From Genesis and Eugenics, and Beyond* (Goettingen, 2013), pp. 89-108.

¹⁸ On this point I am much indebted to P. J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2001).

¹⁹ R. J. Halliday, ‘Biology and Politics: Some Victorian Perspectives’ in *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, vol 2, issue 5, (1979), 119-31.

²⁰ Michael Ruse argues that Darwinism did in fact become ‘a secular religion, in opposition to Christianity. In the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first part of the twentieth

species, eugenics may be seen as supporting the very notion of humanity as defined in terms of a hierarchy of distinct social bodies, some better biologically equipped than others. But ‘eugenic qualities’ as Galton was keen to emphasise, were not just ‘a sound mind and body’ and ‘an intelligence above the average’ but also ‘a natural capacity and zeal for work’.²¹ The healthy body and sound morals, which Galton deemed essential, needed to be accompanied by industriousness and social schemes for the betterment of men and women. In this eugenics is as close to Christianity, with which it shares some basic moral tenets, as to Darwinism, from which it differs in some crucial aspects.²² As made clear by William Inge (1860-1954), later Dean of St Paul’s, in the first issue of *The Eugenics Review*, the ‘aim of Christian ethics is, quite definitely, the production of ‘the perfect man’. And he explained further: ‘The word translated perfect means full-grown, complete and entire. The perfect man is the man who has realised in himself the ideal of what a man should be’.²³ But it was not only the precepts of ‘Christian ethics’ that were echoed by the eugenicists. Many scholars linked the eugenic obsession with biological regeneration to the modern quest for ‘a new meaning’ of life and a ‘new man/woman’, which political ideologies such as communism, fascism and Nazism embraced so forcefully in the twentieth century.²⁴

century Darwinian evolutionary thinking [...] became a belief system countering and substituting for the Christian religion: a new paradigm’. In M. Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion. What Literature Tells us about Evolution* (New York, 2016), p. 82.

²¹ Sir F. Galton, ‘Eugenic Qualities of Primary Importance’ in *The Eugenics Review*, vol 1, no 2, (1909), 76.

²² See D. B. Paul, ‘Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics’, in J. Hodge and G. Radick (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 219-45.

²³ W. R. Inge, ‘Some Moral Aspects of Eugenics’ in *The Eugenics Review*, vol 1, no 1, (1909), 33.

²⁴ As discussed at length in R. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, 2007).

Tellingly, eugenics aimed to re-define what to be a human being was, and what were the social and biological responsibilities following from this realisation. In late-Victorian Britain, Galton and others phrased the aspirations of eugenics as the dream of a society populated by healthy individuals aware of their biological value. This vision is clearly expressed in his 1901 Huxley Lecture at the Anthropological Society. Referring to the Parable of Talents in the New Testament, Galton praised the ‘good and faithful servant’ of the parable, who knew how to turn his five talents into ten through wise planning. ‘Whether it be in character, disposition, energy, intellect, or physical power, we each receive at our birth a definite endowment,’ Galton noted, ‘some receiving many talents, others few; but each person being responsible for the profitable use of that which has been entrusted to him’.²⁵ This is why it was useful to try to consolidate those hereditary qualities, but also why great caution was necessary. Improvement, Galton believed, was to be found as much in the proper management of human aspirations as in responsible reproduction.

That Galton’s eugenic ideas were hardly original needs no discussion here. The main tenets of eugenics derived equally from Classical and Christian humanisms, Immanuel Kant’s anthropology and the nineteenth-century scientific theories of evolution and progress—from the work of Charles Darwin, Thomas Malthus and Herbert Spencer, amongst others. Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, in particular, made a powerful impact on Galton, arousing in him ‘a spirit of rebellion against all ancient authorities whose positive and unauthenticated statements were contradicted by modern science’.²⁶ Emboldened by Darwin’s work on the question of species, Galton set about defining his own interest in, as he put it, ‘the central topics of Heredity and the

²⁵ F. Galton, ‘The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under the Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment’ in F. Galton, *Essays in Eugenics*, p. 3.

²⁶ F. Galton, *Memories of My Life* (New York, 1909), p. 287.

possible improvement of the Human Race’,²⁷ by bringing a new imaginative intensity and excitement to scientific work on the transmission of ‘hereditary talent and character’, to name one of his famous articles published in 1865.²⁸

Galton envisioned this theory of eugenics not as an *agent* of historical change (as later eugenicists would almost feel obliged to) but as an *interpretation* of the scientific truth revealed in statistical and biometrical research. Around the end of the 1860s, he began to formulate a new vision of science devoted to heredity, which was to allow would-be eugenicists not merely to extend his or her knowledge about biological and gender inequality (using biometrical measurements of various individuals, for instance) but to intervene actively into the processes of the human body using the control of reproduction and through other measures. There was, too, an unrestrained endorsement of positivism seen as the methodology useful to the genuine improvement of the human condition. Believing in the growing acceptance of Darwinism, and thus of a new scientific doctrine about the origins of man, Galton also sought to limit the domain of organised religion in shaping human destiny, envisaging a leading role for science instead. The ‘goal of Galtonian teaching,’ his disciple, the statistician Karl Pearson (1857-1936) noted, was ‘the conversion of the Darwinian doctrine of evolution into a religious precept, a practical philosophy of life’. And he clarified this point further. ‘Some may question’, he said, ‘whether we have more here than in Comte’s *Religion of Humanity*. I think so, because it is freed of the ceremonialism which Comte and Gruppe demanded as a factor of religion, and it is essentially based on the acquirement of knowledge in a field of science, which had little if any existence in

²⁷ Galton, *Memories of My Life*, p. 288.

²⁸ F. Galton, ‘Hereditary Character and Talent’ in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, vol 12, no 68 and no 70, (1865), 157-66 and 318-27.

Comte's day.²⁹ This passage reveals how Galton's interpretation of eugenics was seen early on as a scientific ontology premised upon the individual as the only one who can *accept* or *deny* his or her own improvement. Besides focusing on ways to encourage those of worthy human qualities to reproduce more regularly whilst discouraging those whose racial and social value was questionable, Galton's eugenics was notable for its celebration of the individual's responsibility for his or her own destiny and for the emphasis it placed on acting on behalf of that responsibility.³⁰

Whilst organised religion stood outside his scientific agenda, Galton did not repudiate it. In fact, Galton hoped that the similarly disciplined devotion that had made religion the dominant social and cultural force for centuries would likewise inspire the future supporters of eugenics. In an article written for *The National Review* in 1894 entitled 'The part of religion in human evolution', Galton re-affirmed his conviction that 'A passionate aspiration to improve the heritable powers of man to their utmost, seems to have all the requirements needed for the furtherance of human evolution, and to suffice as the basis of a national religion, in the sense of that word as defined by J. S. Mill.'³¹ I do not wish to dwell on Galton's relationship to Mill and other political economists, as others have done it more ably than I can hope here.³² What I wish to point out is that while Galton's eugenic theories seem to have been a natural consequence of his interests in heredity and evolution, the particular form that his idea of eugenics took reflected other contemporary theories as well, theories which were not situated within natural sciences but

²⁹ K. Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, vol 3a (Cambridge, 1930), p. 93.

³⁰ This is what the philosopher F. C. S. Schiller (1864-1936) defined as the 'moral ideal' of eugenics. See F. C. S. Schiller, 'Eugenics as a Moral Ideal: The Beginning of a Progressive Reform' in *The Eugenics Society*, vol 22, no. 2, (1930), 103-9.

³¹ Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, vol 3a, pp. 92-3.

³² See, for example, Chris Renwick, 'Eugenics, Population Research, and Social Mobility Studies in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain' in *The Historical Journal*, vol 59, no 23, (2016), 845-67.

within the emerging discipline of sociology.³³

Such a claim must be understood within its proper historical context. During the nineteenth century, the metaphysical privilege that the Enlightenment philosophers gave to man—seen as the expression of a ‘universal essence’—was endorsed by the belief that scientific progress is incremental and that there was a cumulative growth of human knowledge; in other words, there was a belief in both humanity’s cultural and biological progress. Within this historical and cultural context, the ultimate objective of eugenics was defined as the creation of a functional society, subject to the rational design of modern science. Certainly, this aim was based on the recognition that religion was in ‘retreat’ and that secularisation was in ascendancy, particularly in the Protestant countries. Some authors such as the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) attempted to fuse Calvinism with evolutionary sciences;³⁴ others such as the secretary of the Zoological Society of London, Peter Chalmers Mitchell (1864-1945) allowed for no such synthesis. Scientists superseded priests, Mitchell declared triumphantly in 1903.³⁵

In some respects, eugenics imitated religion’s dream of transforming humanity. With its objectifying scientific gaze, eugenics offered the possibility of creating a society in which those individuals who were deemed less worthy were not allowed to reproduce. This gradual invasion of the private sphere of the individual has been traditionally associated with the emergence of modernity and with the birth of modern forms of systematic population control. As Michel Foucault and his followers have long argued, the birth of the modern state was also the birth of

³³ R. J. Halliday, ‘The Sociological Movement, the Sociological Society and the Genesis of Academic Sociology in Britain’ in *The Sociological Review*, vol. 16, no 3, (1968), 377-98.

³⁴ A. C. Flipse, ‘Against The Science-Religion Conflict: The Genesis of a Calvinist Science Faculty in the Netherlands in the Early Twentieth Century’ in *Annals of Science*, vol 65, no 3, (2008), 363-91.

³⁵ P. C. Mitchell, ‘Preface’ to E. Metchnikoff, *The Nature of Man: Studies in Optimistic Philosophy* (London, 1903), p. ix.

organised discipline and punishment with the ultimate purpose of creating obedient and identical subjects.³⁶ Whether Galton thought in terms of purifying society from ‘defective genes’ or of protecting it from mixing with ‘racially inferior’ elements, it is clear that he believed one of the main functions of the modern state to be the achievement of the nation’s racial enrichment and physical regeneration.

In light, then, of the persistently anti-religious overtones of theories of human improvement characterising the end of the nineteenth century, Galton’s eugenics was bound to take a sharper meaning. It became simultaneously a biological and a social project. In the name of science and on behalf of the state, Galton fused hereditarian and cultural determinism with a modern vision of a eugenically aware society. To be sure, this view was derived also from his consistent endorsement of nature over nurture. I have discussed this aspect of Galton’s theory elsewhere, so I will not repeat it here.³⁷ Suffice to say that Galton highlighted the importance of nurture already in his study on ‘Hereditary Improvement’ published in 1873.³⁸ In his commending of nurture, Galton dwelt on the need to create an effective ‘system which shall be perfectly in accordance with the moral sense of the present time’, warning that ‘the ordinary doctrines of heredity’, if proven to be true, aimed to ‘transform the nation’, biologically and morally.³⁹ As the history of eugenics in the twentieth century amply demonstrates, in most cases, this project also implied a new theory of modern society, guided by scientific elites, intent on controlling human reproductive patterns for social and biological purposes.

³⁶ C. Hanson, ‘Biopolitics, Biological Racism and Eugenics’ in S. Morton and S. Bygrave (eds.) *Foucault in an Age of Terror* (London, 2008), pp. 106-17.

³⁷ M. Turda, ‘Race, Science, and Eugenics in the Twentieth Century’ in A. Bashford and P. Levine (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York, 2010), 62-79.

³⁸ F. Galton, ‘Hereditary Improvement’ in *Fraser’s Magazine*, vol. 7, no. 37, (1873), 116-30.

³⁹ Galton, ‘Hereditary Improvement’, p. 116.

So, what did Galton's characterisation of eugenics as the 'religion of the future' really amount to? Its central message pointed to the importance of moral education. But, equally importantly, this eugenic philosophy was predicated upon a view of individual and social regeneration regulated by science. Eugenics, from this perspective, was not about encouraging the individual's public involvement, as was customary in the individualist liberal tradition, but was a means of encouraging precisely the opposite: the fulfilment of individual aspirations within the collective realm. To improve humans should become a systematic, ritualised practice, Galton recommended, and eventually eugenic harmony will be achieved after a few generations. Family history and genealogy was crucial to this eugenic narrative of human improvement. The singular focus on the history of the individual, on his or her origins and ancestry, was repeated routinely whenever the physical value of the eugenic subject was questioned and probed. The body, for Galton, was thus a heterogeneous synthesis of physicality and history in which the ephemeral biological condition of the present intersected trajectories of past inheritance. In appropriating the authority of religion for eugenics, Galton ventured to ponder what religion might be without the divine design whilst, at the same time, demanding that eugenics be seen to challenge the premises underlying other scientific disciplines dealing with the human body and human relations such as sociology and anthropology.

It is worth pausing for a moment to discuss the impact that Galton's definition of eugenics as a secular religion had upon his contemporaries. First of all, it offered the discipline of dogma, resting on the scientific authority of the natural sciences, but aiming to forge a biological theology for the future. This was a promise which eugenicists the world over were to enthusiastically embrace in subsequent decades. During the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a growing appreciation among cultural and political elites that their country's

survival was wedded to its biological future, and eugenicists were the experts to supervise it.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of eugenics is intimately connected to specific historical circumstances, including empire, colonialism and racism. But, importantly, it was also linked to a general acceptance of theories of evolution by the scientific community and supported by a remarkable degree of institutional networking. Galton's first commandment—the popularisation of eugenics 'as an academic question'—served as the mantra of the First International Eugenics Congress convened in London during July 1912. Certainly at the time, British, American and German eugenicists were praised for their commitment to practical schemes of social and national rejuvenation derived from theories of evolution and heredity. More often than not, developments in other national contexts displayed similar features. Eugenics in France, Italy, Russia and the Scandinavian countries, for example, emerged both as a response to local conditions and as an emulation of the above-mentioned hegemonic models. This intermingling of internal and external factors dominates, in fact, all national histories of eugenics.

It did not take long for eugenicists all over to embrace Galton's idea of eugenics as a new secular religion. But the problematic nature of this idea remained unresolved, allowing some eugenicists to conceive of Galton's theory as situated at the interstices of sociology and biology, whilst others situated it at the confluence of science and politics. In Hungary, for instance, it appealed to progressive leftist eugenicists such as József Madzsar (1876-1940) and Zsigmond Fülöp (1882-1948).⁴⁰ In the Soviet Union, it was embraced by the biologist Nikolai Koltsov (1872-1940), who declared at the inaugural meeting of the Russian Eugenics Society in 1921: 'Eugenics has a high ideal that is also capable of giving meaning to life and moving man to sacrifices and self-limitation: to create through the conscious work of many generations an

⁴⁰ See M. Turda, *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 53-6.

elevated type of a human, a mighty king of nature and creator of life. Eugenics is the religion of the future and it awaits its prophets'.⁴¹

Other authors such as the translator and writer Maximilian A Mügge (1878-?) connected Galton's eugenics to the critique of modernity and the need for a new morality, both widely popularised at the time by a host of philosophers and writers. Building on a temporal synchronicity between Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty* and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus spake Zarathustra* Mügge considered that the latter's concept of the 'Superman' was, in fact, the expression of the 'poetic-philosophical concept of Positive Eugenics'.⁴² Mügge's was 'a potent attempt to formulate a new code of morals'⁴³ and other eugenicists, albeit less enamoured with Nietzsche, agreed. For the English physician Caleb Saleeby (1878-1940), eugenics was 'at once a science and a religion, based upon the laws of life, and recognising in them the foundation of society'. Saleeby believed that eugenics and religion could co-exist, as both shared a desire for human perfection. 'If the struggle towards individual perfection be religious', Saleeby concluded, 'so assuredly, is the struggle, less egotistic indeed, towards racial perfection'.⁴⁴

The eugenicist wanted to be not just a prophet, but also the priest of the new scientific religion. This is evident in 'Eugenics as a Religion', a text which the American eugenicist Charles Davenport (1866-1944) prepared as a 'sermon' for the Golden Jubilee Celebration of the Battle Creek Sanitarium held in 1916. Public gestures such as these offer insights into how some scientists conceived of the process by which eugenics was communicated to the general public in

⁴¹ N. K. Koltsov, 'Improvement of the Human Race' [1921] in V. V. Babkov, *The Darwin of Human Eugenics*, trans. from the Russian by Victor Fet (Cold Spring Harbor, NY, 2013), p. 86.

⁴² M. A. Mügge, 'Eugenics and the Superman: A Racial Science, and a Racial Religion' in *The Eugenics Review*, vol 1, no 3, (1909), 185.

⁴³ D. Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool, 2002), p. 62.

⁴⁴ C. W. Saleeby, *Parenthood and Race Culture: An Outline of Eugenics* (London, 1909), p. ix and p. 304.

the form of a secular ritual performed to ensure the protection of the family and the race.⁴⁵

We must be aware, however, of the fact that the religious language used by some eugenicists was as artificial as any other, and some eugenic writings performed in this sense, an artifice. Others, however, such as William Inge, used references to Christianity in a candid way, because, for him, such a reading of Galton's ideas absorbed and redeemed whatever disagreement may have existed between science and religion. 'The scientific mind', he noted in 1921, 'ought to be able to take long views, and to realise that pessimism is as little justified as optimism. [...] We are on the side of Dame Nature, and Dame Nature has a short and sharp way of punishing her rebels'.⁴⁶

Inge transcribed the signification of Christianity (as a moral project) onto the signification of eugenics (as a biological project). For him, as for the other religious figures who embraced eugenics, the effective dissemination of eugenics and its survival as a secular religion was primarily a matter of its *form*—that is, a language that renders into biological improvement the religious ideals of sexual morality and family—and not of its *content*—that is, the replacement of organised religion by organised eugenics. In this sense, eugenics as a secular religion achieves a new meaning.

I have offered these examples (and many more can be adduced), across the political and geographical divide, of some eugenicists who reflected on Galton's programmatic text from 1904 in order to emphasise the spatial texture of the notion of eugenics as a secular religion. Surely the notion, as I have tried to suggest here, is endowed from the outset with an enormous burden: it not only documents a *transfiguration* in the ways individuals understand their responsibility towards future generations but it offers the eugenicist the possibility to judge the

⁴⁵ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, pp. 92-4.

⁴⁶ W. R. Inge, 'Eugenics and Religion' in *The Eugenics Review*, vol 12, no 4, (1921), 265.

work of Nature itself. Undoubtedly, what operates here is a deeply embedded desire to weave into the idea of eugenics as a secular religion not only an inventory of social history, but equally importantly a recourse to moral authority in a form that would become the emblem of some of the many attempts to rescue eugenics from its racist appropriations before and after 1945.

The American sociologist John W. Slaughter (1878-1964) remarked upon this close relationship in his paper presented at the First International Moral Education Congress at the University of London between 25 and 29 September 1908. The development of a morality was central to Galton's theory of eugenics as a secular religion. According to Slaughter: 'Eugenics supplies a new moral principle. We have without doubt entered upon a new chapter in ethics based on knowledge and man's nature and conditions of his descent. This biological knowledge is demanding a corresponding sense of biological responsibility'.⁴⁷ Rooted in biology, eugenics claimed a distinct moral authority to address issues that bore directly on both individual and community, both men and women. What emerges out of the eugenic readings of social and biological life is the need for a new morality along with a new epistemology of the human body.

As is known, in most Christian societies, it was the Church that controlled both the spiritual and the physical body of the nation. Eugenicists, in general, did not discourage religious beliefs, indeed many of them were also practicing Christians, postulating that the state's biological aims should reflect the transcendental aims of the church. In other circumstances, the Church intervened directly in finding a solution to demands for the eugenic improvement of society and many here are familiar with the social and welfare activism propagated by the Catholic Church.

⁴⁷ J. W. Slaughter, 'Eugenics and Moral Education' in G. Spiller (ed.) *Papers on Moral Education communicated to The First International Moral Education Congress* (London, 1908), p. 381.

No one, perhaps, articulated it more clearly than Monsignor Maurice-Louis Dubourg (1878-1954), the Archbishop of Marseilles, during the conference on 'The Church and Eugenics' in 1930, organised by the Association of Christian Marriage. For Dubourg: 'If the goal of the new science [of eugenics] is, as its name indicates, to assure good offspring, it can only inspire our sympathy and find in Christian morality an auxiliary, even a very precious guide, because we profess that if God commanded man to multiply, He did not wish him to multiply poorly.'⁴⁸

In the eyes of the Catholic Church, of course, negative eugenics was morally and religiously objectionable.⁴⁹ But, as Catholic eugenicists pointed out, Galton's version of eugenics as a secular religion was one which accepted a life dedicated to improvement and in this respect resembled the Christian conception of morality. This was made clear by the German Jesuit and biologist Hermann Muckermann (1877-1962), who, in his 1933 *Eugenik und Katholizismus* (*Eugenics and Catholicism*), insisted that Galton 'never lost sight of the need to link his science with religion'.⁵⁰ In fact, Muckermann suggested that Catholicism and eugenics were not fundamentally different as in both religion and biology certain absolute principles could be found. 'Different religious sects, he concluded, 'have different point of view, and each must respect the view of the others. But all should work together for a national eugenics on the basis of a natural ethic'.⁵¹

As is known, amidst the growing acceptance of abortion amongst Christian states in Europe and beyond, Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) issued the Encyclical on Christian Marriage,

⁴⁸ Quoted in W. H. Schneider, 'The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940' in M. B. Adams (ed.) *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York, 1990), p. 80.

⁴⁹ See I. Richter, *Katholizismus und Eugenik in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich. Zwischen Sittlichkeitsreform und Rassenhygiene* (Paderborn, 2001).

⁵⁰ H. Muckermann, 'Eugenics and Catholicism' [1933] in P. M. H. Mazumdar (ed.) *The Eugenics Movement: An International Perspective*, vol 4, (London and New York, 2007), p. 21.

⁵¹ Muckermann, 'Eugenics and Catholicism', p. 67.

Casti Connubii in December 1930. As discussed by Emmanuel Betta in his article, the encyclical castigated the prevention of ‘unworthy’ life advocated by eugenicists both as an expression of excessive secularisation and of the state’s interference in the individual and family’s private sphere.⁵² In this new political staging—characterised most notably by the rise of the totalitarian regimes in Continental Europe and elsewhere, such as Latin America—something paradoxical happened that Galton could not have envisioned: eugenics eventually became a secular religion, albeit not so much by virtue of its promise of human perfection, as by virtue of its transgression of, and ultimately total disregard for, human values.⁵³ Yet, amidst growing concerns over the abuses of German racial science, biologists such Julian Huxley (1887-1975) continued to be committed to Galton’s vision of eugenics as a secular religion, declaring in 1936: ‘Once the full implications of evolutionary biology are grasped, eugenics will inevitably become part of the religion of the future, or whatever complex of sentiments may in the future take the place of organised religion.’⁵⁴ This belief in the progress of eugenics is—as I tried to demonstrate in this article—an aspect of a much wider discussion about the role of science and religion in modern societies. Eventually, Huxley hoped,

Science will be called on to advise what expressions of the religious impulse are intellectually permissible and socially desirable, if that impulse is to be properly integrated

⁵² E. Betta, ‘From Biopolitics to Eugenics: The Encyclical *Casti Connubii*’ in this issue.

⁵³ See Turda and Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 103-28.

⁵⁴ J. S. Huxley, ‘Eugenics and Society’ in *The Eugenics Review*, vol. 28, no 1, (1936), 11-31, here at p. 11. See also Chris Renwick, ‘New Bottles for New Wine: Julian Huxley, Biology and Sociology in Britain’ in *The Sociological Review Monographs*, vol 64, no 1, (2016), 151-67.

with other human activities and harnessed to take its share in pulling the chariot of man's destiny along the path of progress.⁵⁵

Rightly or wrongly, many eugenicists including Galton felt that organised religion was cripplingly deficient in dealing with human improvement. 'Science', the French biologist Alexis Carrel (1873-1944) remarked in 1935, gave 'man the power of transforming himself. It has unveiled some of the secret mechanisms of his life. It has shown him how to alter their motion, how to mould his body and his soul on patterns born of his wishes. For the first time in history, humanity, helped by science, has become master of its destiny'.⁵⁶ This was eugenics as a modern, secular religion, based on morality and the vision of a technologically controlled humanity derived from science. Thus, while eugenics was indeed designed to remodel the individual and society, it also illustrated something else, namely the implication of transcendence, accompanying the knowledge of how the improvement of man's *nature* could in fact be achieved. Yet, for Galton, persuasion, not coercion, was eugenics' primary purpose.⁵⁷ Where later generations of eugenicists saw the commodification of state power over individual, political ruptures and racial incompatibility, Galton still pictured an underlying unity of the human race. He, like other scientists of the late-nineteenth century, was aware of human imperfection but he assumed that eugenics—together with social mobility and education—could perfect the individual. It was thus not only a claim for universalism that eugenics borrowed from

⁵⁵ J. Huxley, 'Religion as an Objective Problem' in J. Huxley, *Man in the Modern World* (London, 1940), p. 141.

⁵⁶ A. Carrel, *Man, the Unknown* (New York, 1935), p. 241.

⁵⁷ C. P. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After* (London, 1952), pp. 103-23.

religion but also the idea of perfection and salvation. This, understandably, irked some authors, including, most notably, the Austrian legal philosopher Hans Kelsen (1881-1973).⁵⁸

What this ideal of a new eugenic religion was assumed to reveal was a profound transformation of the individual and the collective; or in the words of the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), the ‘humanity of the human.’⁵⁹ Reflecting this desire—and by relying on scientific disciplines such as sociology, biology, medicine and anthropology—eugenics re-arranged the *nature* of the human body, both in *quantity* (by attempting to regulate reproduction) and in *quality* (by stimulating social and biological worth), according to a set of principles based on the laws of heredity and knowledge of the social and biological environment.

It was this portrayal of eugenics which relied on the fusion between scientific language and forms of religious and political rituals. Any attempt, therefore, to recapture how he and other late-nineteenth -century eugenicists formulated their ideas of eugenics must inevitably contain an understanding of how ideas of evolution and heredity have competed with traditional forces, such as religion, for supremacy over the human body. When Galton spoke of eugenics as the ‘new religion of the future’, he not only hoped to convert coming generations to the new scientific faith, but also that these new converts would establish eugenics as a universally recognised science for the improvement of the human race. Eugenics was thus articulated as a secular religion, not in its *religious sense*, however, but in its most concrete *historical sense*: that is, as an answer to the question: How can humanity be improved? Or in Frederick Osborn’s

⁵⁸ See Hans Kelsen, *Secular Religion: A Polemic Against the Misinterpretation of Modern Social Philosophy, Science and Politics as ‘New Religions’* (Vienna and New York, 2011).

⁵⁹ E. Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. by Nidra Poller (Champaign, IL, 2006) [first published in 1972].

words eugenics should be an ideal which 'will continue to lend mystery to life and hope to our aspiration.' And then rather mischievously he asked: 'Is this 'scientific Calvinism'?'⁶⁰

⁶⁰ 'Is Eugenics "Scientific Calvinism"?', p. 19