

dently untroubled by his methods as a psychoanalyst, which ranged from the unorthodox to the unethical: He tried to explain the psyche mathematically, ate dinner while seeing patients, and conducted five-minute sessions while billing for a full hour.

In the introduction to *Secrets of the Soul*, Zaretsky writes that modernity promised autonomy, the emancipation of

women, and democracy. He sees little basis for hoping that the three promises will be fulfilled anytime soon. “When we search for optimism today, we need to look inward,” he writes. It’s at once good advice and bad: We may discover the formula for freedom but be left emancipated only in the realm of thought.

—ERICA CROWELL

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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**PREACHING EUGENICS:  
*Religious Leaders and the American  
Eugenics Movement.***

By Christine Rosen. Oxford Univ.  
Press. 286 pp. \$35

There’s a special thrill of disgust that comes from contemplating how close one’s own society came to adopting ideas later identified as among history’s most repellent. Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, courts this thrill in her account of how some American clergymen in the first decades of the 20th century took up, preached, and ultimately discarded a range of ideas that went under the name *eugenics*. The linking of clerics, particularly liberal clerics, with eugenics is certainly provocative. Even more provocative is Rosen’s thesis that liberal clerics were especially susceptible to eugenic ideas because they had forsaken solid theology in favor of the Social Gospel—the idea that religion should strive not just to change individual hearts but to combat social injustice. A belief in the perfectibility of society, this argument runs, led naturally to an interest in perfecting the human material that composes it.

But did American preachers endorse anything like the eugenics that the Nazis later made notorious, or for that matter the eugenics that enthusiastic laypeople were espousing in the United States? Rosen’s otherwise interesting book suffers badly from its vagueness on this point. On the one hand, we are told, American eugenicists “called for programs to control human reproduction. They urged legislatures to pass laws to segregate the so-called feeble-

minded into state colonies . . . they supported compulsory state sterilization laws aimed at men and women whose ‘germplasm’ threatened the eugenic vitality of the nation; they led the drive to restrict immigration from countries whose citizens might pollute the American melting pot.” On the other hand, branches of the eugenics tree “grew to include . . . health reform, sex hygiene, radical sex reform, marriage counseling, antivice campaigns, ‘fitter family’ contests, the child-rearing advice industry, and, eventually, the birth control movement.”

In the vast majority of Rosen’s examples, it’s these latter, milder “branches” to which the clergy clung. She’s not entirely forthright in distinguishing root from branch, either: A whole chapter is devoted to clergymen’s support for mandatory health certificates for couples wishing to marry, a measure not only not “eugenic” (Rosen eventually concedes in passing that it’s closer to “hygienic”), but still considered unremarkable today. She catalogues prominent liberal ministers, Reform rabbis, and even a few Catholic priests who lent their names to organized eugenics groups or took part in a national “eugenics sermon contest”; again, though, they seem mostly to have confined themselves to the gentler forms of social direction and the scientific-sounding flourishes that the eugenics vocabulary gave their rhetoric.

“Unlike the pitched battles over evolutionary theory,” Rosen observes, “in the eugenics movement, religion and science met on common ground.” But that common ground, the desire to purge society of

human imperfection and human suffering, was—as she rightly notes—illusory. Trying to link eugenics and religion, some divines were led into strange contradictions, wondering, for instance, whether traditional Christian charity actually hurt humanity by helping the weak survive. By 1930, an improved understanding of genetics had undercut the basic concepts on which eugenics relied, and the movement ran out of steam in the United States well before Hitler and hindsight made the very word radioactive. The preachers in Rosen’s story abandoned the eugenics

vocabulary as well—more evidence that most of them had simply been parroting conventional wisdom.

Rosen never does draw a convincing link between eugenics and the liberal Social Gospel. The political landscape she sketches might have been fuller had she discussed the more conservative-leaning doctrines generally referred to as social Darwinism. But she tells an intriguing story nonetheless, a useful counterpoint to the standard narrative of science and religion at perpetual loggerheads.

—AMY E. SCHWARTZ

### CONTRIBUTORS

**Martha Bayles**, who teaches humanities in the honors program at Boston College, is writing a book about how aesthetic standards are developed and sustained in democratic culture. **Erica Crowell** is writing a brief biography of the psychoanalyst Otto Will and a novel based on the life of Indian mathematician Srinivara Ramanujan. **Sheri Fink**, the author of *War Hospital: A True Story of Surgery and Survival* (2003), has worked with humanitarian organizations in the Balkans, Iraq, and elsewhere. **Winifred Gallagher** is the author of *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (1993) and the forthcoming *No Place Like Home: A Psychological House Tour*. **Nicholas Hengen** is a former researcher at *The Wilson Quarterly*. **Larry L. King** is writing a biography of his late *Harper’s* magazine editor, friend, and fellow writer Willie Morris. **Amy E. Schwartz** writes about cultural issues for *The Washington Post* and other publications. **Kenneth Silverman** is the author most recently of *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (2003). **Rebecca Skloot**, a contributing editor of *Popular Science*, is the author of the forthcoming *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. **Martin Walker** is editor in chief of United Press International.

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