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From Eugenicists to Family Planners: America's Religious Promoters of Contraception


Melissa J. Wilde

University of Pennsylvania, mwilde@sas.upenn.edu

Kajaiyai Hopkins

University of Pennsylvania

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Keywords

religion, contraception, eugenecis, world population

Disciplines

Christian Denominations and Sects | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | History of Religion | Medicine and Health | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology | Sociology of Religion | United States History | Women's History

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Melissa J. Wilde and KaJaiyau Hopkins

Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

Early proponents of contraception among American religious groups were staunch eugenicists who promoted birth control in the hopes of curtailing the “runaway fertility” of poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants. By the early 1930s, their campaign to legalize contraception was largely successful, but eugenics would soon go from being a sign of progressive politics and enlightened scientific understanding to a dirty word associated with Hitler. By examining the statements of all of the early liberalizers on contraception from 1920 to 1965, this paper demonstrates that although these groups purged their statements on contraception of the word eugenics by the end of WWII, the fertility of “poor others” remained their focus for the next few decades. Talk of “race suicide” changed to talk of “responsible parenthood” as their focus moved away from the whitening Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants to the poor in the Third World and Americans in the inner cities.

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1. Introduction

Religion has long played a role in fights over access to contraception, but few know that early proponents of birth control among American religious groups were staunch eugenicists. By examining the statements of American religious groups who were the most active advocates of contraception between 1920 and 1965, this paper demonstrates that although these groups eventually purged their statements on contraception of the word eugenics, those groups who liberalized in the 1930s because of racialized concerns continued to have racialized reasons for promoting contraception throughout the next three decades. Talk of “race suicide” changed to talk of “responsible parenthood,” as the particular populations they were concerned about shifted away from the whitening Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants to the poor of America's inner cities and the global south.

This paper is structured as follows: it first gives the reader an introduction to the connections between the eugenics movement and progressive Protestantism in the USA in the early twentieth century. While research on both movements is well established, little research until now has examined the connections between the two. Likewise, there has been no investigation into what happened to believers in eugenics when the movement was forced underground with the advent of WWII and the eventual realization of the horrors that Nazi belief in eugenics wrought. After this historical overview, the paper then describes the data and methods we used to examine the seven American denominations that constituted America's staunchest advocates of contraception between 1930 and 1965. The groups we focus on in this paper are listed on **Table 1**, which provides information about mergers, name changes, the dates of their pronouncements on birth control (from the earliest to the latest liberalization), any precursor's early stance on birth control if it was not an early liberalizer, and the periodicals examined for each denomination.

After describing the data and methods we used, the paper then turns to the chronological story, first demonstrating to the reader the strong and open promotion of eugenics each of these groups made in the 1920s and 1930s and then demonstrating that the most explicit talk of eugenics had waned by 1935, even among groups who initially supported Hitler openly. The fact that eugenic talk disappeared, however, does not mean that eugenic beliefs had. The next section of the paper juxtaposes the groups' earlier openly eugenicist reasons for promoting birth control with their later reasons. It demonstrates that the promoters of contraception remained concerned about the fertility of poor and nonwhite populations—with a new focus on the poor in the Third World and the "inner cities" of the USA.

2. Data and methods

2.1. The sample

This dataset this study is drawn from includes 31 initially distinct religious denominations (please see [1] for more information on the complete sample). This paper focuses on the "early liberalizers" who promoted contraceptives for eugenics reasons in the early 1930s and how their views on birth control evolved over the next 30 years, once the pill was invented and had received FDA approval in 1960 [2]. This paper focuses on what happened to these groups, who were originally nine in number but, because of mergers, were only seven distinct denominations by the time the pill was approved.

An early liberalizer is defined as any American religious groups that promulgated an official statement in support of birth control between the peak years of the first wave of liberalization (1929–1934). All also promoted legalization in their periodicals during this time. Constituting America's most prominent religious denominations, **Table 1** demonstrates that only three of the original denominations made it through the next three decades relatively intact: the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Reform Jews, and the Society of Friends (now called the Friends General Conference).¹

¹The Society of Friends reunified with Hicksite Friends (to become Friends General Conference) in 1955.

Denomination	Periodicals ⁱ and years available for analysis (1919–1965)	Date liberalized
Reform Judaism	AJC Yearbook	1929
Unitarian Universalist Association (1961)	The Unitarian Universalist Register-Leader (1961–1965)	
• Universalist General Convention (Universalist Church of America after 1942)	The Christian Leader (1926–1945) The Universalist Leader (1953–1961)	1929
• American Unitarian Association	The Christian Register (1919–1961)	1930
United Church of Christ (1957)	United Church Herald (1958–1965)	.
• Congregational Christian Churches (1931) - Christian Church, General Convention - Congregational Churches, General Council	The Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty (1918–1932) The Advance (1934–1958)	1931 1931
• Evangelical and Reformed Church (1934) - Reformed Church in the United States - Evangelical Synod of North America	The Messenger (1936–1958) Reformed Church Messenger (1919–1932) The Evangelical Herald (1916–1936)	. . .
United Methodist Church (1968)ⁱⁱ	The Christian Advocate (1919–1965)	1968
Methodist Church (1939) - Methodist Episcopal Church - Methodist Episcopal Church, South		. 1931
Presbyterian Church (USA) (1983)		
• United Presbyterian Church in the USA (1958) - United Presbyterian Church of NA - Presbyterian Church in the USA	Presbyterian Life (1958–1965) The United Presbyterian (1919–1955) The Presbyterian (1935–1945) Presbyterian Life (1955–1958)	1959 . . 1931
• Presbyterian Church in the USA	Presbyterian Survey (1919–1965)	1960
Society of Friends (Orthodox)ⁱⁱⁱ	The Friend (1945–1955) The Friend's Journal (1965)	1933
Protestant Episcopal Church	The Living Church	1934

ⁱ**Other Periodicals Researched:** Birth Control Review (1912–1940); Christianity Today (1956–present); Ecumenical Review.
ⁱⁱThe Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church in 1968.
ⁱⁱⁱNow, the Friends General Conference.

Table 1. America's early religious advocates of contraception.

The Unitarian Universalist Church formed from a merger between two early liberalizers—the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist General Convention in 1961.

The United Presbyterian Church in the USA was formed in 1958 as the result of a merger between an early liberalizer, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and an unofficial supporter, the United Presbyterian Church in North America.

The Methodist Church was formed in 1939 as a result of a merger between the eugenicist early liberalizer of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the silent Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is the most complicated denomination examined in this paper. Unlike the other denominations analyzed here, it includes a precursor denomination that was an outspoken critic of eugenics, the Reformed Church in the US, which merged in 1957 with two other denominations, the early liberalizer the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical Synod of North America.

In sum, of the seven remaining distinct denominations, three remained intact, three resulted from mergers of like-minded fellow eugenicist groups, and one, the UCC, resulted from a merger of a wider variety of denominations.²

2.2. Periodical research

The primary data presented here come from an analysis of each denomination's periodical between 1919 and 1965.³ Although there was some 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.⁴

With the rare exception of those that were electronically searchable, research assistants examined each of the periodicals by hand and gathered all articles that mentioned the keywords listed in **Table 2**, which varied by time period, and were added inductively as the research progressed.

On average, about 250 articles were summarized, coded, and analyzed for 50 different periodicals, for a total of about 10,000 articles, about one-third of which we draw on for this paper.⁵

3. Progressive Protestantism, race, and contraception (1920–1965)

"Race suicide" was the idea that desirable White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were being outbred by less desirable poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants. The fight against it was led by the American Eugenics Society (AES) [3–6]. Largely a lobbying group, the AES was the premier eugenics education association at the time. The AES cultivated close ties with its "eugenic apostles" ([7], p. 3), most of whom were "nationally prominent ministers" and rabbis ([4], p. 88;

²The UCC published four articles on birth control in 1965, which is among the most of any early liberalizer. The tone of their articles is very similar to the others with a focus on the "crisis" in India, China, and Latin America and weaker but still presents concern about the inner cities in the USA.

³We 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.

⁴Almost all of the denominations had yearbooks or minutes from their general conventions that we also used for various official statements. These are not included in these periodical numbers (but do show up in the references where relevant), unless we had to perform keyword searches on them because a popularly oriented periodical was unavailable. **Table 1** indicates when this was necessary.

⁵The first half of the research, from 1919 to 1932, averaged about 120 articles for 35 periodicals, for a total of about 4000 articles.

All years (1918–1965)	Early period (1918–1932)	Later period (1935–1965)
<p>Sex and gender issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Contraceptives] • [Family planning] • [Margaret Sanger] • Feminism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Women's issues] • [Women's rights] • Sexuality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Sex education] • Marriage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Divorce] <p>Race:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eugenics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Juvenile delinquency] • [Overburdened parents] • [Anglo-Saxon] • [Superior race] • [Racial stock] • [Blood/line] • [Genetics] • [Heredity] • [Undesirable/desirable] • "Race suicide" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Differential birth rates] • Immigration • Race (black/white) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [the Negro] • [Lynching] • [Racial justice] <p>Theological/denominational issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundamentalists or modernists (or -ism) • Federal Council Churches (FCC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Council of Churches (NCC) • World Council of Churches (WCC) • "Social Gospel" • Catholicism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ["Rome"] • Religious growth/decline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Revivals] • [Internal division/strife] • Missions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Domestic missions] • [Foreign missionary activity] 	<p>Historical context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's Suffrage • Temperance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Prohibition] • The depression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Capitalism] • [Socialism] • [New deal] • [Social security] • Science <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Evolution] • [Darwin] • [Scopes Trial] • Labor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Labor unions] • [Labor movement] 	<p>Sex and gender issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [The pill] • [Malthus] • [Population explosion] • [Food insecurity] • [Voluntary parenthood] • [Responsible parenthood] • Abortion • Sexuality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Sexual revolution] • [Summer of love] • [Homosexuality] <p>Historical context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WWII <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Nazi] • [Hitler] • [Germany] • [Religious persecution] • [Jews] • [Roma or Gypsies] • [Fascists/-ism] • [Conscientious objection] • [United Nations] • Communism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Cold War] • [Russia] • [USSR] • [China] • [Korean War] • [Vietnam War] • [McCarthyism] • Growth of higher education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [College] <p>Race:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race (black/white) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Brown vs. board of education] • [Segregation] • [Civil rights movement] • [Voting rights] <p>Theological/denominational issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catholicism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Ecumenism] • [Vatican II] • Religious growth/decline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Evangelicals/-ism] • [Evangelism] • [Billy Graham]

Table 2. Keywords searched.

[8], p. 8) The AES had well-funded standing committees and regular outreach campaigns and columns in *Eugenics* written for and by religious leaders, all dedicated to communicating with America's religious elite [1, 9].

At first, through the mid-1920s, the AES and its religious allies supported immigration restriction and involuntary sterilization and generally promoted positive eugenics, the idea that “desirable” people should have more (“at least four”) children (see [9, 10]). After little success at actually raising birth rates among desirables, however, the AES and the religious leaders affiliated with it turned to “negative eugenics” and began pushing for the legalization of birth control. Working closely with Margaret Sanger and the American Birth Control League, they did so under the assumption that the birthrate differential was due to the poor’s inadequate access to contraceptive methods. Contraceptives were largely available only through a physician, to which most of the poor did not have regular access.

By the early 1930s, the campaign to legalize contraceptives was largely successful, culminating in the 1936 case *United States v One Package of Japanese Pessaries*. The decision of the case stated that distributing birth control, when recommended by a physician for preserving the health of a patient, was not a violation of the Comstock law that had previously prohibited the practice for its obscenity [11–13]. Though birth control products did not immediately become readily available to patients, the court’s ruling allowed an easier and legal pathway to accessing birth control.

By the time birth control was legalized, however, the American Eugenics Society had all but disappeared [14–16]. Researchers offer various reasons for the AES’ demise—from rapid loss of popularity due from the taint of Hitlerism ([17], p. 50) to internal divisions and strife over the direction of the Society ([18], p. 301) to the general decline of the field due to a significant drain in funding ([19], p. 324). Most likely because of a result of all of these factors, researchers agree that by the mid-1930s, eugenics went from being a sign of progressive politics and enlightened scientific understanding to a dirty word associated with Hitler [6, 14–16, 20, 21] and, correspondingly, that the AES was largely defunct.

However, although explicit mention of eugenics largely faded from the public view, much eugenic thought, and activism around birth control, remained but with two differences. First, although the focus was still on poor people of color, instead of being concerned about nonwhite immigrants’ fertility in the USA, activists became focused on fertility in the developing world [5], ([6], p. 186, 187), [22, 23] and, to a lesser extent, African Americans in the inner cities [15]. Second, instead of explicit talk about “race suicide” and open promotion of eugenics, eugenicists began to engage in a more “discreet and mild-mannered form of eugenics” ([18], p. 299) where they attempted to accomplish “eugenic control” through “population control” ([5], p. 186, 187).

Taking advantage of the public’s exhaustion and anxieties after the close of WWII, eugenicists strategically promoted population control as crucial to preventing “the imminent destruction of human society” ([5], p. 83) and the achievement of world peace ([23], p. 153). In a quote that demonstrates this tactic, in 1945, Guy Irving Burch, who was the director of both the Population Reference Bureau and the AES, stated that “uncontrolled human reproduction...favors the least gifted of society...and in the long run will destroy human liberties and any chance for a world at peace” ([22, 23], p. 153).

Those connections between the two movements ran deep and are undeniable. For example, a founding member of the AES, Frederick Osborn, became President of the Population Association

of America from 1949 to 1950 and started the journal *Eugenic Quarterly* in 1954. That same year, he noted great progress in relation to the “growing concern with world population problems” ([24], p. 3a) and “the need to balance the concern over size of population with concern for the quality of that population” ([24], p. 3a). As another example, take AES President Henry Pratt Fairchild, who was the first President of the Population Association of America (as the AES began its decline from 1931 to 1934), and a few years later became the President of the American Sociological Association in 1936.

Thus, the history of eugenics in the USA is well established, as is its relationship concerns about world population and the organizations and academic disciplines (especially demography and sociology) that would attempt to curtail world population in the next few decades. However, although religious groups have always been central to debates over contraception, there has been very little systematic investigation of which groups supported early birth control reform, and why they did (with the exception of 1). Likewise, until now, there has been no investigation into how those religious groups who were advocates of eugenics adjusted their perspectives on contraception overtime, as eugenics became delegitimized. This paper explores these groups' views over the next three decades and demonstrates that by and large they remained staunch advocates of contraception. Like the former eugenic activists who became population control advocates, their focus shifted from the out-of-control fertility of immigrants and their children to the “population explosion” among the poor of the Third World and the inner cities of the USA.

4. Eugenic thought among the early liberalizers

Working with the AES, during the first wave of liberalization, the early liberalizers worked hard to prevent “race suicide.” At first, these religious leaders largely focused on “positive eugenics” or the idea that more desirable people should have more children. For example, in 1932 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” ([25], p. 1336).

However, such a call was at best a swan song for those hoping to increase the fertility of desirable parents. By the late 1920s, it was clear that positive eugenics was at best a stop gap measure and that race suicide would not be prevented unless something could be done to curtail “the high birth-rate among the inferior” ([26], p. 663) most of whom were Irish and Italian immigrants, populations that were “increasing nearly five times as rapidly as non-Catholics” ([27], p. 514). By that time, the AES had joined forces with the American Birth Control League and began enlisting the support and legitimacy that religious leaders' endorsements would lend to their cause. And, those denominations affiliated with the AES did not disappoint.

4.1. Official statements: open about the eugenic need for birth control

In the least openly eugenic statement among the early liberalizers, a 1931 resolution by the General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches (CCC) endorsed a report titled

“The Moral Aspects of Birth Control,” wherein birth control was approved as a method to guarantee:

the rights of children to be wanted and the right of husband and wives to assume parenthood. Therefore, we favor the principle of voluntary child bearing, believing that it sacramentalizes physical union and safeguards the well being of the family and society. ([28], p. 1031).

While the “good of society” could definitely imply eugenic reasoning, other groups were much less careful in their language choices. Both of the precursors to the Unitarian Universalist Church had eugenic reasons front and center in their official statements. The Universalist Church officially liberalized on birth control at their General Convention in 1929, stating that “This committee finds that birth control is one of the most practicable means of *race betterment*” ([29], emphasis ours). One year later, the American Unitarian Association recommended “to its constituent churches and members an earnest consideration of the fundamental social, economic and *eugenic* importance of birth control to the end that they may support all reasonable efforts in their communities for the promotion of the birth control movement” ([30], emphasis ours).

The Protestant Episcopal Church was such an ardent promoter of eugenics that its statement on birth control was actually indexed under “eugenics” and not contraception or birth control in its yearbook. The statement read:

[W]e endorse the efforts now being made to secure for licensed physicians, hospitals, and medical clinics freedom to convey such information as is in accord with the highest principles of eugenics and a more wholesome family life, wherein parenthood may be undertaken with due respect for the health of mothers and the welfare of their children... Therefore the committee suggests that as members of the Church concerned with the problems of welfare and citizenship we should study amendments to the existing laws which would thereby enable physicians, hospitals, and medically supervised clinics to make scientific birth control information available to women who for physical or economic reasons are in need of this information. ([31], p. 551).

The statements for the rest of the early liberalizers were similar.⁶ In 1929 the Society of Friends made their support for eugenics (and sociology) and concerns about race suicide quite clear:

Sociology and eugenics emphasize birth control continually as an important means of basically improving the quality of the human race. Obviously there should be a relatively large number of children from those parents who can support and educate them, and a relatively smaller number from less qualified parents. ([32], p. 4).

In 1931 the Presbyterian Church in the USA stated forcefully that “economic conditions and a worthy standard of living clearly make it wrong to bring children into the world without adequate provision for their nurture and proper consideration for the health of the mother”

⁶Methodist Episcopal Church: Pronouncements were made on a local level (Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1934). The only official early liberalizer appears to have been the Northeast Conference.

([33], p. 3). The announcement of the denomination's stance went on to add that proponents on birth control believed that it would produce "healthier children, healthier mothers, and that the human stock would be greatly improved...quantity would lessen and quality would increase" ([33], p. 3).

4.2. The periodicals

The eugenic thought apparent in the early liberalizer's official statements was only more apparent in their popular periodicals. For example, the American Unitarian Association's periodical *The Christian Register* (which published at least two articles promoting eugenics annually between 1929 and 1931) asked:

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 stupendous achievement? ([34], p. 516).

The article closed by asserting "The church has a responsibility for the improvement of the human stock" ([34], p. 516). The other precursor to the Unitarian Universalist Church, the Universalist General Convention, made its concerns about race suicide apparent in its periodical, the *Christian leader*, when it 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. ([26], p. 663).

Similarly, an article from an early UCC periodical, the *Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty*, argued:

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? ([35], p. 1037).

Although they only unofficially supported birth control reform (until their merger with the Presbyterian Church in the USA), the United Presbyterian of North America's periodical *The United Presbyterian* made their belief in eugenics and general views about white supremacy quite clear. For example, they 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. ([36], p. 4).

Likewise, although they never officially liberalized on birth control, the Evangelical Synod of North America's *Evangelical Herald* quoted the father of eugenics, Francis Galton, and 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" ([37], p. 683).

5. The more things change, the more they stay the same

The decline of the eugenics movement in the USA coincided with the acceleration of WWII. As all of the Americas focused on the war, there was little discussion of birth control reform or contraception, a situation that lasted well through the end of the war. By 1955, however, contraception had regained the attention of American elites. However, now the focus of their concern was no longer the whitening Irish and Italian Catholic immigrants and their descendants (whose birthrates had indeed plummeted ([38], p. 34). Instead, concern about fertility was focused on the globe and in the parts of it that had both high birth and poverty rates. For example, in 1955, the *United Presbyterian* reported:

Malthus worried a great many people about overpopulation, but he is out of style now and there are many learned viewpoints on how population problems can be solved. I haven't heard any good solutions. Overpopulation (and I say again, it is a geometric increase, at a frightful rate) can be solved by terrible wars or by equally terrible pestilence. Now isn't that a nice choice? Or if we continue to mass up we can think of new ways for getting food, and if we get too crowded we can all stand up to eat, I suppose, and take up less room. ([39], p. 2).

Articles in *The Advance* expressed concern about "the population increase" and "the food situation" in India, noting the need for:

Christian hospitals, private practitioners, and other qualified persons [to] cooperate with the local churches in setting up counseling centers for a on all family problems, including spacing of births, the problem of fertility and the physical, psychological and/or spiritual maladjustment that grow up between marriage partners. ([40], p. 11).

The increasing world population incited a sense of urgency for population control among religious advocates for birth control, as one reader of *The Advance* stated in a letter to the editor:

Our Protestant churches in this country, while giving support to family planning in their national organizations, have been very slow in really supporting the movement throughout the world...India, Thailand, Japan and many more of the countries where resources do not

balance with populations are making valiant efforts to start a program aimed at population stabilization. Even the World Health Organization is trying to help with this problem and has done a good deal. But it is hampered in the all out effort by the Catholic countries which are in the United Nations. ([41], p. 26).

In 1955, population growth in the USA did not go without mention, although the reporting on the fact lacked the same tenor of concern as it did for the rest of the world, as the following example from the *United Presbyterian* demonstrates:

Census Bureau recently reported that last year witnessed the largest annual population increase in United States history. This increase was 2,823,000. The previous high was 2,718,000 in 1951. In 1940, the census authorities were predicting some eventual decline in population because the annual population increase was then tapering off. The downward trend ended in 1947 with what was known as the "baby crop" of WWII. For the past five years, the bureau termed the growth "remarkably stable at a relatively high level. ([42], p. 8).

The article went on to clarify that "immigration is a minor factor in the population increase" and to emphasize that the "4000,000 births, an all-time record" the previous year would exacerbate the chronic overcrowding of our public school system and create housing and employment needs but acknowledged that "In the light of our present food surpluses and improved methods of agriculture, it does not appear that food will be a problem" ([42], p. 8).

Groups often released new official statements on the occasion of an official merger. Such was the case when the Presbyterian Church in North America merged with the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, in 1958. The statement released by the new denomination uses two terms which become synonymous with the movement to control world population: voluntary family planning and responsible parenthood. They wrote that they approved the principal of both:

Voluntary family planning and responsible parenthood, [and] affirms that the proper use of medically approved contraceptives may contribute to the spiritual, emotional, and economic welfare of the family. ([43], p. 385).

All of the concerns mentioned by America's leading religious advocates of contraception in 1955 would become only more prominent in the next decade.

5.1. After the pill

By 1965, with the achieved FDA approval of the pill, the leaders of America's most prominent religious groups remained deeply concerned about overpopulation, especially in poorer countries. Their calls for action were often quite urgent, as was the following from the United Church of Christ's *United Church Herald*:

Two other acute problems of our mission must engage your attention. I speak of population and poverty. I am told that at the present rate of increase world population will double within the lifetimes of many of us. I do not doubt that scientific advances eventually will alleviate some of the suffering which the exploding population is visiting on mankind. But until that

time comes we can imagine all too plainly, the millions of ill-clad, ill-fed, ill-housed people who will live in misery if we do not move at once on two fronts to shape the future. ([44], p. 9).

Another article in the *United Church Herald* reported that:

Thoughtful persons in many countries are predicting that within a relatively few years the population explosion will “dwarf our present anxieties” even about nuclear warfare and Communist aggression. Dr. Raymond Ewell, research vice president of the State University of New York, believes that “if present trends continue, famine will reach serious proportions in India, Pakistan and China in the early 1970, followed by Iran, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt within a few years and by most of the other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America by 1980.” “Such a famine,” he believes, “will affect hundreds of millions-possibly even billions-of persons.” It will be the most colossal catastrophe in history. ([45], p. 24).

In many of their statements, this next generation of religious leaders sounded shockingly similar to their predecessors, both in their level of alarm and in their solutions. For example, the *Register-Leader* emphasized the importance of stopping the “unprecedented, malignant growth of world population which thwarts the industrial and educational development of the emerging nations...especially marked in Catholic Latin America” ([46], p. 3). In a review of a book on *The Silent Explosion*, the Unitarian Universalist *Register-Leader* quoted the author, “We are breeding disaster - unless we can curb the silent upsurge of population that perils us all. Here is what America should do about it” ([47], p. 123). Months later, the book was recommended again, this time with a grave message attached:

The most threatening problem facing mankind at the present time is what has appropriately been called the population explosion—an explosion, however, which in the title of his admirable book Professor Appleman makes quite clear is all the more difficult because it is so silent. ([48], p. 20).

Although the particular focus varied from group to group, there was a significant amount of consensus about the areas of concern: India, Latin America and, to a lesser extent, the poor in the USA as the following quote in *Presbyterian Life* from 1965 indicates:

The American population explosion seems to be slackening off somewhat, and the American growth rate is not so menacing as that of parts of Asia and Latin America. India, for example, according to demographers, may well double its population within thirty five years. The growth rate in mainland China is said to be still faster. ([49], p. 30).

Arguing, it seems, against the focus on the Third World, Reform Jews asserted “The rapid growth of world population affects not only the underdeveloped areas throughout the globe, but the United States and the Western world as well” [50]. The article went on to emphasize that since most people would not seem to be in favor of killing off those already alive in the Third World, promoting contraception was the only humane alternative:

Another misconception pinpointed in the article is that a “baby-boom,” such as was experienced by the US after the war, is the crucial factor in the population explosion affecting the

underdeveloped areas. This is not the case, Professor Wrong says. Rather it is the "sharp drop in the death rate" which is spurring the population increase in Asia and Africa...In clearing up some of the misconceptions about the nature of the population explosion, Professor Wrong emphatically concludes: "It becomes brutally apparent that there is no alternative to a decline in population growth, and that the only ways to achieve such a decline are birth control, or a relaxation of death-control. [50].

By far the most often-mentioned country seen to be in the most dire situation in 1965 was India. In 1965, an article in the Unitarian Universalists' *Register-Leader* wrote:

It is horrifying to reflect that in India there are at this time eight million more people than there were last year at the same time; that a quarter of a million people in a city like Calcutta have nowhere else to sleep but on the streets. India is but an example of what can happen to a country when its population remains uncontrolled. Every other country is similarly threatened with the disaster that has overtaken India. ([48], p. 20).

In a statement that harkened very much of eugenicists' darkest statements about racial cleansing, perhaps similar to the rhetoric that spurred Reform Jew's stance on the issue above, one author in the United Church of Christ's *Advance* asked:

Why, it may be asked, are doctors and nurses striving to heal the sick and prevent disease in India when that country can't adequately support its present population? Under the circumstances is this a Christian or even a humanitarian service? These questions, not frequently propounded, present a problem of growing importance to the medical practitioner -especially to the Christian physician. ([40], p. 11).

Although there was consensus that the situation was perhaps most dire in India, Latin America received even more attention in many of these religious periodicals. For example, the Protestant Episcopal Church reported that:

The Rt. Rev. Frederick W. Putnam, Jr., Suffragan Bishop of Oklahoma, said in Dallas, Texas, that more children are being born in Central America than can ever be educated. The bishop, returning from an extensive tour of Central America, spoke at the first of a series of Lenten services at the Church of the Incarnation. About the only solution, suggested Bishop Putnam, is for all religious leaders in Central America to work out some approach to keep the birth rate down. Otherwise, added the bishop, there is little if any hope for ever coping with the problems of illiteracy and the rising population. The bishop visited Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. ([51], p. 11).

Latin America was different largely because as Roman Catholics, the population was actually not supposed to use contraceptives. For example, an article in the UCC's *United Church Herald* reported that:

Throughout Latin America there is a mood of anticipation, hoping against hope that Pope Paul VI's commission of scientists and theologians will find some acceptable answer to the untenable Catholic attitude toward birth control. This mood is not limited to Latin America, of

course, but it is intensified on that continent where the population—which is heavily Catholic, at least in name—is expanding more rapidly than anywhere else. With a growth rate of nearly three percent annually the population doubles every 23 years. ([45], p. 24).

Finally, it is important to note that just as it was during the first wave, the activism of these denominations was being supported and coordinated by other organizations. This is made abundantly clear in a statement from *The Christian Advocate* that mentions the entire Third World:

Against the backdrop of the growing worldwide debate on the population explosion, the Board of Missions' World Division is joining other Protestant denominations and a unit of the National Council of Churches in an accelerated program of spreading birth control information and equipment to medical mission outposts and personnel overseas. Fifty hospitals, clinics, and dispensaries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have been sent informational leaflets from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America discussing newly developed intra-uterine contraceptive devices recommended for use by village peoples. An accompanying letter from William Strong, New York, planned parenthood consultant of Church World Service (interdenominational relief and rehabilitation agency of the NCC), offered various services to overseas medical units, including: Information about new contraceptive devices and the names of doctors in the vicinity of various institutions who can offer help and advice; Educational materials in the field of birth control for varying languages and cultures; Supplies of contraceptive materials; and Funds to extend services or make new services available. Dr. Harold N. Brewster, medical missionary of the World Division, indicated strong support for the worldwide program of family-planning education and action which Church World Service has undertaken. ([52], p. 22).

5.2. America's poor

Although their focus had certainly shifted to the Third World, American religious advocates of birth control remained concerned about fertility in the USA, especially among the poor or those in the "inner cities." For example, in 1965, *The Presbyterian* reported excitedly that "Birth-control clinics are likely to be set up as part of the anti-poverty war in America, supported by Federal funds" ([49], p. 30). Another author writing for the United Church of Christ's *United Church Herald* declared:

Although the population explosion may not yet affect us personally, American churchmen need to overcome their natural reticence to discuss the meaning and methods of birth control. We can make no greater contribution to the welfare of mankind and to the relevance of the Christian gospel than by providing the knowledge and materials for responsible parenthood in our own country and throughout the world. ([45], p. 24).

Referring to two laws that were still on the books in 1965 that limited access to contraceptives to populations in the USA, *Presbyterian Life* argued that "Striking down the Connecticut statute, and indirectly the Massachusetts statute...would be a boon to the pioneers in the field

of planned parenthood clinics and eventually to *the people who most need counsel and encouragement in managing the size of their families*" ([53], p. 26, emphasis ours; see also [54]). Some articles, like "Private Rights and Rising Birth Rates" in *Presbyterian Life* emphasized that "rich and poor alike [have an increased understanding] of the need to limit families" ([49], p. 31). However, it was generally apparent that the fertility of America's poor was the main focus—made clear, for example, in another article in *Presbyterian Life* which informed readers that the poor in the USA have a "high rate of literacy" ([49], p. 31).

In a statement that makes its focus on the domestic poor clear only by failing to mention other countries, the Protestant Episcopal Church endorsed:

[T]he following goals in connection with the augmentation of family planning services to low-income persons: (1) Policy changes by appropriate government agencies to permit investigators, staff workers, and public health personnel to initiate conversation about family planning and child spacing with their clients (2) To increase the scope of referral possibilities to permit referrals to private agencies as well as to the already existing possibilities of clergy of their choice and a private physician. (3) Ultimate placing of clinics services at the point of need, including public financed institutions with staffing and operations paid for from public funds. (4) An interim step, if necessary, of purchasing services from existing private agencies. ([55], p. 8, emphasis theirs).

The following article in the Quaker periodical *Friends Journal* mentioned "urban unrest" as one of the key problems contraception could help curtail—along with, and this was unique to the Quakers at the time—the destruction of the environment (most of the other early liberalizers mentioned the natural world on in relation to food insecurity, if at all):

We are deeply concerned as Friends that each (human) life created be enabled to flourish in family love, fully expressing divine potential, through responsible parenthood... The grave approaching problems of urban unrest and world tensions, as well as conservation of the environment for future generations, require prompt attention... We must therefore begin to devote far greater energy to the development of adequate governmental and family planning programs, providing information to all needing it, as well as medical services and material to all in a manner consistent with their belief. ([56], p. 141).

6. Discussion: distancing from the legacy of eugenics while focusing on other peoples' fertilities

America's religious advocates of birth control changed their focus on whose fertility concerned them between the first and second waves of liberalization on contraception. Initially, concerned about race suicide in the 1920s, the groups examined here promoted the legalization of contraception during the first wave so that poor Italian and Irish immigrants would use them. Thirty years later, the focus of whose fertility was the problem had radically shifted to the Third World and, to a lesser extent, America's "urban poor."

6.1. Other people's fertilities: responsibility, not rights

What remained the same, however, was that these groups promoted contraception out of a concern about *other people's* fertilities. America religious advocates of birth control did not promote family planning out of a desire to reassure their flock that they were in good standing for using it—or even to reassure their members that they were fighting for their rights to use it. In fact, rights entered the early liberalizers' periodicals and official statements only a few times and always in relation to others. For example, rights are implied in this relatively brief mentioned by the Quakers in a "Letter from Pakistan," in 1965:

Of urgently needed changes, the position of women has priority. I must not omit to say that family planning is now getting a lot of support and none too soon! ([57], p. 108).

However, even in this statement, explicit talk of "rights" does not appear. When it does, the rights these religious leaders referred to are not those we have come to accept as part of the conversation today. Even in an article titled "Private Rights and Rising Birth Rates," which appeared in *Presbyterian Life* in 1965, the rights in focus appear not to have been the right to *use* contraception (from the individual perspective), but rather the right *not to use* contraception or to reject sterilization:

In other parts of the world however, even when contraceptives are available, people fail to use them. More than eight thousand birth-control clinics have been operating in India, according to a report by Ford Foundation population-expert Dr. Nicholson J. Eastman. But the attendance at the clinics has been "disappointingly small," and 'only a small fraction of the few women attending these clinics return for new supplies. Several answers to this problem have been proposed, among them the use of intrauterine coil or ring method of contraception, which in new tests has proved satisfactory. This method does not require continuous attention, and seems to be suitable to between 80 and 85 percent of women. Another possibility is the widespread increase of voluntary sterilization, a method useful when couples have had as many children as they wish and 'the only realistic answer,' according to Dr. Buxton. Some see sterilization as too drastic to be widely acceptable, however. ([49], p. 30, emphasis ours).

Only one article, in the Unitarian Universalists' *Register-Leader*, referenced rights in a way that could apply to both others and their own people, in the following quote that bemoaned the slow state of progress in 1965:

It should be easy to decide who owns the individual's fertility—the individual himself, the church, or the state. Yet such a decision is not simple. For centuries, fertility ownership has been contested by the three parties. However, I believe that the right of the individual to control his own fertility is slowly gaining ascendancy, but progress is slow, sometimes microscopic. Full emancipation is still distant, as the restrictive birth-control laws of Massachusetts and Connecticut (overturned by the United States Supreme Court in June), the punitive abortion statutes of all United States jurisdictions, and the reticence of physicians to perform sterilization operations all attest. ([46], p. 3).

6.2. Distancing from eugenics by focusing on voluntary and responsible limitation

Thus, these groups were not generally thinking yet in terms of individuals' rights to contraception. Instead, they were still focused largely on encouraging those whose fertility they deemed irresponsible to use birth control. Although this stance, in and of itself, could still be seen as a legacy of eugenics, most of these religious leaders' statements had been largely purged of blatantly eugenicist language. Even so, however, one can still see evidence of these religious leaders distancing themselves from the legacy of eugenics. Much of this comes through in statements that indirectly reference eugenicists' promotion of involuntary sterilization, such as that above or such as when *The Living Church* wrote in 1965 that they would promote contraceptives, "respecting at all times [low income persons'] complete freedom of choice" ([55], p. 8).

Indeed, one could argue that the term "voluntary parenthood" in and of itself is such a move. However, it is telling that the groups most likely to adopt voluntary parenthood were not the staunch and earliest advocates of contraception examined here. Those most likely to stress voluntary parenthood were those groups who took a critical stance regarding contraception in the first wave but had come around to liberalization by the time the pill was invented. The early liberalizers, however, tended to emphasize, instead, *responsible* parenthood—the very term implying that some parents, namely, those who were poor or who had more than two children, were *irresponsible*, as the following example from the *Register-Leader* made quite clear:

In the eyes the eyes of the state, a female has been a brood sow with the ultimate ideal of producing an annual litter...she is never a responsible parent, the mother of two carefully planned children. Most often she is a woman who has been so preoccupied and so successful with begetting that she has not had time to menstruate between pregnancies during her twenty years of marriage. ([46], p. 3).

However, as their focus on *responsible parenthood* implies, while there might have been some distancing from the language, and even the policies, of eugenics, it is also clear that all of the religious advocates of contraception had identities as leaders in the movement. In 1965, with no sign of concern regarding their early motives, the *Christian Advocate* proudly declared [58–61]:

Ministers are not doing the job they need to do in teaching their people about the disastrous implications of the rising tide of world population...Because Methodists were the first denomination to say family planning was a moral necessity, the church has a particular moral responsibility to take the lead in seeing that their communities have family planning facilities, Winfield Best, executive vice-president of Planned Parenthood World Population, reminded the nearly 50 church leaders attending the seminar. ([58], p. 23).

Author details

Melissa J. Wilde* and Kajaiyai Hopkins

*Address all correspondence to: mwilde@upenn.edu

Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

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