

John A. Ryan and the American Eugenics Society: A Model for Christian Engagement in the Age of “Consumer Eugenics”

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Abstract

By any measure, American Christianity’s participation in what today is called the “Old Eugenics” of the early twentieth century, in which forced sterilization of “undesirables” and restrictive marriage laws were common in many states, was a dark moment both in the nation’s history and Christian history. Mainline Protestant progressives were primary advocates of eugenics policies while Evangelicals often stood on the sidelines in the face of unprecedented abuses of state power against the rights and dignity of citizens. American Catholic resistance to the wave of government-sponsored programs that were reinforced by civil-society activism and were ostensibly designed to improve the human species has been lauded in many circles, yet the history of Catholic involvement in this period is more complex than is generally assumed. Father John A. Ryan was among a few Catholic scholars who actively engaged eugenics advocates on their own terms, serving on the Committee for Cooperation with Clergymen of the American Eugenics Society and ultimately concluding that the Society’s negative eugenics agenda, which centered on sterilization, “targeted” birth control, and restrictive marriage and immigration policy, was morally bankrupt. He believed that any ranking system that divides human beings into superior and inferior categories based on their genetic makeup leads to the treatment of individuals as instruments and contravenes Catholic teaching on the human person.

Ryan’s activism serves as a much-needed model for Christians today as they grapple with the potential social and moral consequences of what alternately is called the New Eugenics or Consumer Eugenics, a market-driven phenomenon that is expanding beyond the control of state or other governing institutions and which, to date, has inspired surprisingly little theological debate. Father Ryan resisted the wave of progressive rationalism in his day and its tendency to treat humankind as one-among-many species for scientific manipulation. Consistent with his advocacy of a “living wage,” Ryan sought a broad social commitment to human flourishing that can only begin with acknowledgement of the *imago Dei* and a commitment to preserve the dignity and sanctity of each individual.