ABORTION, EUGENICS, AND CIVILIZATION:
CATHOLIC ANTI-ABORTION ARGUMENTS
DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

by

Kate Hoeting

Advised by Catherine Brekus and Natalie Malter

A Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Theological Studies,
Harvard Divinity School,
Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 10, 2021
During the Great Depression, financial pressures forced the birth rate so low that the population of the United States declined for the first time in American history.¹ This drop may have been due to the increase in abortions despite the procedure’s illegality in every state. It is impossible to accurately determine how many people self-induced, but estimates suggest that the number of abortions at least doubled during the early 1930s.² Researchers at the time estimated that as many as 40% of pregnancies ended in abortion.³ As gynecologist A.J. Rongy wrote in 1933, “It is common knowledge that abortion has become a widespread feature of American life.”⁴ To some Catholic theologians, this prevalence of abortions signified the impending downfall of American society, which they characterized as a descent into “paganism.” In articles published in Catholic journals like Commonweal, America, and The Linacre Quarterly, these Catholic men became prominent voices in the American discourse on abortion.

Because the need for abortion care increased, the Great Depression sparked a period of revived interest in reproductive healthcare.⁵ In the early 1930s, three American physicians published the first monographs arguing for the legalization of abortion.⁶ Likewise, historian of reproductive health and politics Daniel K. Williams describes the Great Depression as the time to which “the pro-life movement can trace its origins.”⁷ Given the predominance of Protestants in today’s anti-abortion movement, one might expect Protestants to have played a prominent role in

For their generous and sage guidance in crafting this paper, I thank Catherine Brekus, Natalie Malter, Ann Braude, Monica Mercado, Melissa Cedillo, Margaret Hamm, Madeline Levy, and Mary Moon.

¹ Wendy Kline, Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 97.
⁴ A.J. Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? (New York: Vanguard, 1933), 75.
⁶ Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 20.
⁷ Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, abstract.
conversations about abortion in the Great Depression. This was not the case. During the 1930s, Protestants were largely silent on abortion. Instead, Catholic theologians dominated the conversation. Given the importance of the time period in the development of American reproductive health politics, anti-abortion Catholic perspectives on abortion shaped the foundation of abortion discourse.8

How did Catholic theologians craft their arguments against abortion? What did their perspectives on reproductive health reveal about how they viewed their identities as American Catholics? During the Great Depression, arguments over abortion, including Catholic theologians’ resistance to abortion, were designed around visions of a “civilized” America. In Catholic journals, theologians described Catholicism as a civilizing force that had the power to advance the nation from the darkness of "paganism." To bolster this argument, they depicted contraception, abortion, and eugenics as murder. In this way, Catholics portrayed themselves as the saviors of the nation.9

This paper engages anti-abortion articles in Catholic journals and medical texts arguing for abortion’s legalization from 1929 to 1939.10 In Catholic journals, anti-abortion theologians did not prioritize the health and wellness of people who needed abortions. The authors rarely paused to contemplate the experiences of women who were navigating their reproductive lives in a time of extreme financial duress.11 These anti-abortion writers also reflected more on the

8 Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 27.
9 Douglas C. Baynton, Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics (Chicago Scholarship Online, 2016).
10 There is one errant source that is dated outside of this timeframe: an article in The Linacre Quarterly published in 1942, just months after the United States entered World War II. See J. Gerard Mears, “In Fear and in Secret They Do Dammable Deeds,” The Linacre Quarterly 10, no. 3 (July 1942): 64–7.
11 Throughout this paper, I alternate between the term “women” and “pregnant people.” It is my intention to reflect the trans-exclusive frameworks under which Depression Era writers operated while still acknowledging that transgender people existed and became pregnant in the 1930s as well as today. For more on the myth that trans identities are a futuristic aspect of modernity, see Julian Gill-Peterson, Histories of the Transgender Child (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
sexual morality of the nation as a whole than the decisions of individual women. In other words, anti-abortion Catholic theologians were more concerned with the future of the nation than the morality of abortion itself. During the Great Depression, much like today, arguments about abortion decentered the well-being of people who could become pregnant. Contemporary pro-choice political groups often highlight the way that some anti-abortion rhetoric tends to ignore the needs of women. Although this argument is common in activist communities, few historical perspectives on this tendency exist. Catholic theologians’ Depression Era articles provide one point of evidence that conversations about abortions deprioritized pregnant people. Instead of focusing on the needs of women, these theologians used anti-abortion rhetoric to criticize the nation’s immorality and to position themselves as the moral arbiters of civilization.

In general, little has been written on abortion during the Great Depression, and even less has been written on abortion and religion. Although scholars have taken up the question of how the Great Depression transformed reproductive healthcare, most sources focus on birth control rather than abortion. This gap in scholarship may be due to the paucity of primary sources. Even though contemporary historians have described the Great Depression as a point of increased interest in abortion, there were still relatively few publications on the subject. Protestant thinkers in the 1930s rarely mentioned abortion, and they only did so in conjunction with their arguments over birth control. Some fundamentalist preachers denounced abortion, but most focused on birth control. Additionally, Catholic laypeople lacked a sense of moral concern over abortion.

13 The primary exception to this statement is Daniel Williams’ Defenders of the Unborn.
14 In 1930, for example, the Anglican Communion became the first Protestant denomination to publicly support birth control, but they condemned abortion in the same statement. See Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 17.
At the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, Loyola University hosted a booth displaying aborted fetuses at various stages of development. People flocked to view it, and there is no evidence that visitors found it odd that a Catholic medical school would create such an exhibit. Moreover, ongoing debates over eugenics rarely centered abortion; instead, sterilization was a much more common method of controlling the country’s genetic makeup because it was less expensive for the government. Although today abortion is a volatile topic, its presence in the political and theological landscape of the Great Depression was far more muted. In most public discourse during the Great Depression, abortion was not the primary topic of debate on sexual morality.

But for anti-abortion Catholic theologians, the prevalence of abortion was an important gauge for measuring the integrity of the nation. In this way, anti-abortion Catholic perspectives stood out from other religious commentaries on abortion. Catholic theologians’ anti-abortion articles are a particularly important lens through which to understand the relationship between religion and abortion in the Great Depression. Although people who could become pregnant were the most deeply impacted by the Catholic Church’s doctrine on abortion, women were not offered the opportunity to publicize their opinions on reproductive health in Catholic journals. For example, in 1926 and 1927, the Catholic journal America published op-eds by laywomen about the sacred nature of sex in marriage. Backlash ensued, and one priest accused America of being the “Catholic counterpart” to the publications of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger.

17 In Ourselves Unborn, Sara Dubow argues that increased concern over abortion correlated with scientific awareness of fetal development. As fetal imaging technology advanced, scientists began to ask questions about whether fetuses could hear, see, and think, which fueled the anti-abortion movement. See Dubow, Ourselves Unborn, 47.
18 Caron, Who Chooses? 112.
20 Tentler, Catholics and Contraception, 68.
Catholic journals were spaces reserved for men, and most anti-abortion articles were written by Jesuit academics. Although the articles about reproductive health published in Catholic journals during this period were anti-abortion, not all Catholics were against abortion. In fact, the Church has a history of acceptance of and ambivalence toward abortion. The anti-abortion tendencies of these journal articles may be in part due to the identities of their authors. All of these writers were male and educated: their social influence and professional authority allowed their opinions to be published. These anti-abortion theologians used this power to project their dreams of a Catholic nation onto the topic of abortion. In the process, they depicted abortion as one of humanity’s worst evils—one rooted in women’s sexuality.

ABORTION, CONTRACEPTION, AND EUGENICS AS MURDER

In positioning themselves against abortion, Catholic theologians drew from papal authority. In his 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, Pope Pius XI laid down the parameters of the sanctity of marriage. Preserving marriage, and therefore the fate of humankind, meant condemning divorce, contraception, and abortion. God’s vision for the Church would be carried out through the holiness of marriage. Pope Pius XI pitted the burden of maintaining the sanctity of marriage on women. The encyclical emphasized Catholic mothers’ responsibility to raise children of proper sexual morality for the sake of the Church. The encyclical referred to any attempt to interrupt “nature,” defined as the God-given ability to reproduce, as “shameful and

---


22 Miller, *Good Catholics*, 60.

The word “intrinsically” indicated the all-encompassing nature of this condemnation; if a particular woman found herself in a dire situation, the use of contraption or abortion remained inexcusable. Although the encyclical clearly differentiated abortion as a crime worse than birth control, both were described as murder. Additionally, Pope Pius XI placed the sins of abortion and contraception under the same umbrella as the sin of eugenics, arguing that controlling reproduction in any way was “a grave sin.” The encyclical claimed that while it was not necessarily immoral to want to prevent a child’s birth for eugenic reasons, God’s law against murder must always be respected. In this way, Casti Connubii characterized abortion, contraception, and eugenics as murder.

After the encyclical’s publication, priests began to preach against abortion and contraception for the first time. In the decades prior, they had worried about the moral implications of discussing sexual ethics in before a mixed-gender parish. In 1937, the National Federation of Catholic Physicians Guilds declared that even in cases where the pregnant person’s life is at risk, abortion was unacceptable. “God alone is the absolute master of man and his destiny,” they wrote. “Man is only the responsible steward of life.” It is God’s dominion, they argued, to determine who should live and who should die. One priest, Father William Thumel, claimed that abortion was worse than murder, because it involved killing an infant who had not yet been baptized. In the 1942 edition of The Linacre Quarterly, the National Federation of Catholic Physicians Guilds’ magazine, Jesuit J. Gerard Mears said that “uncounted thousands of human beings, created by God but unwanted by their parents, [were] being murdered as they

24 Pius XI, Casti Connubii, Sec. 54.
25 Pius XI, Casti Connubii, Sec 63.
26 Pius XI, Casti Connubii, Sec. 56 and 68.
27 Tentler, Catholics and Contraception, 86.
28 Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 26.
30 Tentler, Catholics and Contraception, 67.
[were] wrenched into this world by criminal abortionists.”31 These writers portrayed any divergence from God’s will as a crime. In a 1935 article in Commonweal titled “Murder Will Shout,” Michael Williams argued that in sensationalizing murder in the streets, the press ignored the less obvious murder caused by those who sell birth control.32 In Catholic journal articles, anti-abortion theologians did more than just compare abortion and contraception with murder: they sought to remove the moral distinction between having an abortion and killing an adult.

The publication of Casti Connubii also encouraged Catholic theologians to write against contraception, the need for which had become more intense due to the financial hardships of the Great Depression. In the decade prior, Protestant leaders had gradually become more receptive to the use of birth control within marriage.33 Catholic theologians, on the other hand, tended to support natural family planning (also known as the rhythm method).34 But the doctrinal positions of the Church did not stop Catholics from finding ways to control their reproductive lives.35 People continued to obtain birth control through labor unions, women’s clubs, and even door-to-door contraception salesmen.36 However, this increase in contraception usage was not all rooted in empowerment and freedom: birth control advocate Margaret Sanger famously saw her work as promoting the social health of the nation by preventing poor families and people of color from having more children.37 But compared to birth control and abortion, sterilization was a far more popular tactic for inflicting eugenic violence on people deemed unfit to reproduce.38 Even

31 Mears, “In Fear and Secret,” 64.
33 Griffith, Moral Combat, 67.
34 Breaking this mold, the Catholic periodical Commonweal published a piece supporting birth control in 1936. See Caron, Who Chooses? 86.
35 In fact, Catholic laywomen were not necessarily opposed to birth control: a 1943 Fortune survey found that 69% of Catholic women thought that married women should have access to birth control, and a surprising 59% thought it should even be accessible to unmarried women. See Caron, Who Chooses? 122.
36 Ross and Solinger, Reproductive Justice, 33.
37 Ross and Solinger, Reproductive Justice, 32.
though abortion was not typically central to eugenic arguments, the eugenic movement influenced discourse on abortion.

In the decades before the Great Depression, the eugenics movement gained social, scientific, and legal traction. Eugenics, the scientific and social effort to improve the supposed quality of the human race through reproductive control, formed biological hierarchies between perceived races, including different European ethnicities. 39 According to reproductive health scholar Dorothy Roberts, “The eugenicists advocated the rational control of reproduction in order to improve society.” 40 Because of its themes of social control and improvement, eugenics became a determinative force in nation building during the early 20th century. In 1907, Indiana became the first state to pass a law mandating that “feebleminded” and “criminally-inclined” people in state custody be sterilized. 41 In 1909, California and Washington followed suit. By the 1920s, it was not at all uncommon to have states with legally mandated sterilization laws on the books designed to eliminate the “undesirable” genetic strains of the population. The 1920s has been characterized as the pinnacle of eugenics in the United States: eugenicists held important positions at universities, and it remained scientifically uncriticized within most intellectual communities. By the early 1930s, eugenics had been refuted by scientists who exposed serious methodological flaws in eugenic studies. 42 But eugenic policies continued. In 1937, a Fortune magazine survey reported that most Americans wanted to increase the number of state-mandated sterilizations. 43 Their wishes were granted: the 1930s was the zenith of eugenic sterilization, with

41 Ross and Solinger, Reproductive Justice, 30.
the greatest number of states sterilizing people at higher rates than ever before or since.\textsuperscript{44}

Scholars have only just begun to recognize that the legacy of the eugenics movement carried well into the 1930s, shaping the way that poor people and people of color experienced the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{45}

The strength of eugenics at this time did not just happen to coincide with the Great Depression: it was fed by it. Some Progressive supporters of the New Deal thought of welfare as a tool not only to better society, but to create a more advanced human race.\textsuperscript{46} Impoverishing previously comfortable families, the Great Depression brought out all the negative traits that eugenic doomsday criers had warned about: widespread poverty, perceived “laziness” due to unemployment, and declining birth rates. In 1934, a display sponsored by the American Public Health Association titled “Eugenics in New Germany” toured the United States.\textsuperscript{47} The exhibit, which quickly gained popularity, argued that the Nazis had found a cheaper and more effective alternative to the New Deal: genocide. The exhibit was unique in that it involved Americans looking to Nazi Germany as a model. Most of the time, it was the other way around. As German scientists began preparing to orchestrate the Holocaust, American eugenicists supported their “scientific” developments and were “conscious and proud” of their impact on Germany’s new policies.\textsuperscript{48} The power of United States World War II propaganda broke those ties. In 1942, the “Eugenics in New Germany” exhibit was shut down and destroyed for being anti-American.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{44} Ross and Solinger, \textit{Reproductive Justice}, 34.
\textsuperscript{48} Kühl, \textit{The Nazi Connection}, 39.
After 1945, eugenicists began a decades’ long attempt to distance themselves from the Nazi regime, claiming that they had criticized it when all along they had helped to feed it.\textsuperscript{50}

This attempt to gloss over the history of American eugenics ignored its pervasiveness. But throughout the arc of the eugenics movement in the United States, there was one particular social group who remained staunchly opposed to eugenics: Catholics. Despite the rhetoric that linked New Deal social welfare to eugenics, writers in Catholic journals did not make the same associations. \textit{Commonweal} decried the sterilization laws that were part of the eugenics movement.\textsuperscript{51} Catholic theologians condemned eugenics by associating it with abortion and birth control, even though many eugenicist organizations opposed abortion.\textsuperscript{52} Associating abortion with eugenics was unusual in 1930s discourse, but these Catholic theologians either ignored that fact or did not recognize the peculiarity of their arguments. Instead, they focused on their main goal: to place abortion, contraception, and eugenics under a murderous banner that signaled the end of society.

As modeled in \textit{Casti Connubii}, Catholic theologians’ perspectives on abortion, contraception, and eugenics were difficult to disentangle. Frequently articles that claimed to be about contraception delved into condemnations of abortion and eugenics as well. A 1931 editor’s note in \textit{Commonweal} summed up the Catholic approach to these topics well: “Legalized contraception would be a long step on the road toward state clinics for abortion, for compulsory sterilization of those declared unfit by fatal eugenists [sic], and the ultimate destruction of human liberty at the hands of an absolute pagan state.”\textsuperscript{53} Unlike the Protestant denominations that had

\textsuperscript{50} Kühl, \textit{The Nazi Connection}, 100.
\textsuperscript{51} Caron, \textit{Who Chooses}? 113.
begun to publicly support birth control, these Catholic theologians did not see accessible contraception as a solution to the increase in abortions; instead, they portrayed birth control as a slippery slope to the downfall of humankind. The many Catholic theologians who endorsed the federal welfare policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal saw their denunciation of reproductive healthcare and eugenics as a natural extension of their advocacy for the marginalized. They argued that preventing the poor from accessing contraception and abortion would be to their benefit. These Catholic theologians viewed themselves as human rights advocates who were protecting the lives of those in danger from the threat of contraception, abortion, and eugenics.

MEDICAL WRITERS IN FAVOR OF LEGALIZATION

Although these Catholic theologians argued vehemently against abortion, the procedure was illegal. By the 1930s, abortion was banned in every state, but that had not always been the case. Before the late 19th century, abortion’s legality and morality went virtually unquestioned in the United States. A woman was not considered pregnant until after “the quickening”—when she first felt the baby kick. Until that point, she was merely considered to have blocked menses, which she could restore through a number of means that were not framed as abortion. Newspapers—including religious newspapers—advertised abortifacient medications subtly marketed to women who wished to “restore menses.” In 1873, one hundred years before Roe v. Wade would legalize abortion, the Comstock Act made sending “obscene materials” in the mail

---

54 Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 20.
55 Griffith, Moral Combat, 207.
56 Griffith, Moral Combat, 207.
58 Mohr, Abortion in America.
illegal, beginning a moral crusade against “abortion” as it was then understood. By 1900, almost every state had passed laws banning the procedure. In the 1930s, anti-abortion laws and their enforcement varied by state. Despite its illegality, some women, who were usually wealthy and white, were able to find physicians who would provide abortions.

Under these conditions in the early 1930s, a small group of physicians began to argue for abortion’s legalization. Three medical monographs were the first to do so: A.J. Rongy’s Abortion: Legal or Illegal? in 1933, William Robinson’s The Law Against Abortion: Its Perniciousness Demonstrated and Its Repeal Demanded in 1934, and Frederick J. Taussig’s Abortion: Spontaneous and Induced, Medical and Social Aspects in 1936. All three of these physicians had something surprising in common: they all were Jewish. At the time, the vast majority of physicians were Protestant. To my knowledge, only one contemporary source, Daniel K. Williams’ Defenders of the Unborn, recognizes their shared religious affiliation. Their Jewish roots have been easy for historians to miss because in all three of the monographs, the authors never once mentioned their religious identities. Although these writers engaged with religion frequently to criticize Catholicism, they did not explicitly form their opinions on abortion from an explicitly Jewish theological perspective. The fact that these medical writers did not identify themselves as Jews means that their perspectives on abortion cannot be extrapolated into a uniform “Jewish” perspective.

59 Griffith, Moral Combat, 207.
60 William J. Robinson, The Law Against Abortion: Its Perniciousness Demonstrated and Its Repeal Demanded (New York: The Eugenics Publishing Company, 1934); Frederick J. Taussig, Abortion: Spontaneous and Induced, Medical and Social Aspects (St. Louis, MO: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1936); Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal?
61 Taussig only brought up Judaism once in his 500-page book—even though the text frequently engaged with religion—to mention that the Talmud permits abortion in certain circumstances. Rongy also barely referenced Jewish thought on abortion. He noted that the command “be fruitful and multiply” made sense for ancient Jewish families, when “a large family was a mark of importance and strength.” Daniel K. Williams’ research is the only way that I could identify these authors as Jewish. For details on all three physicians’ backgrounds, see Williams, Defenders of the Unborn, 24. For moments that these medical writers mentioned Judaism, see Taussig, Abortion, 397 and Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 13.
In a mostly Protestant medical community, why did three Jews pen the first monographs in favor of abortion’s legalization? There are many possible answers to this question, but one response could be that all three of these medical writers were first generation immigrants: Rongy came from Lithuania, while Robinson and Taussig came from Russia. It seems possible that they were influenced by the lenient abortion policies of the Soviet Union. As immigrants, these three physicians were able to bring international perspectives to conversations about reproductive health by challenging American anti-abortion legislation. Similarly, the Catholic anti-abortion theologians were engaged in an international conversation about reproduction by drawing guidance from the Vatican through *Casti Connubii*. The medical writers in favor of abortion’s legalization and the Catholic writers arguing against it were enmeshed in non-American perspectives in a way that many Protestants were not. This international element may explain the reason that the loudest members of the Depression Era debate over abortion were Catholic and Jewish.

One reason that these writers omitted their Jewish heritage could have been the prevalence of anti-Semitism leading up to the Holocaust. As physicians, these medical writers almost certainly faced discrimination in their field. While Catholic physicians could centralize their opinions on abortion through organizations like the National Federation of Catholic Physicians Guilds, Jewish physicians had no such unifying structure. In 1939, the Medical Committee on Research of the Conference on Jewish Relations published a survey that gave a rough count of the number of Jewish physicians in the country. The researchers resorted to paging through the Directory of the American Medical Association to find “doctors whose

---

63 Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 24.
names were distinctly Jewish.”⁶５ They wrote that “it is abundantly clear that Jewish medical students and doctors face certain special problems in the profession,” pointing to medical schools who had placed a quota on the number of Jewish students allowed through their doors.⁶６ Given the anti-Semitism of the era, it is possible attaching their Jewish identities to their work was too great a rhetorical risk.

In addition, it is conceivable that these medical writers avoided discussing their religious perspectives because it seemed inappropriate for their audiences. For some of these writers, it would have been difficult to separate their Jewishness from their public persona, making it less likely that they hid their identity to avoid discrimination. For A.J. Rongy, Judaism was an important part of daily life. His obituary described him as “active in Jewish affairs” in New York City, and he was one of the co-authors of the 1939 survey of Jewish physicians.⁶⁷ Clearly, Rongy did not usually hide his identity. That he did not recognize his religious convictions in his book may have been a reflection of the medical genre; perhaps these medical writers, whose monographs addressed both physicians and policy makers as their audience, considered their religious perspectives irrelevant.

If these medical writers sought to conceal their Jewishness, they succeeded. The Catholic theologians writing against abortion did not recognize these physicians as their opponents. In fact, the Catholic writers did not identify a specific antagonist against whom they wrote. In 1942, anti-abortion Jesuit writer J. Gerard Mears published an article in both America and The Linacre Quarterly that openly cited Frederick Taussig’s pro-legalization volume, describing it as a

---

“learned study on the medical and social aspects of abortion.” Mears seemed unaware that Taussig’s book was one of the most important early textbooks on abortion, and that it walked doctors through how to provide safe abortions, with diagrams included. At the time that Mears published this article, he was serving as an associate editor for America, and yet he seemed ignorant of the basic landscape of arguments about abortion, which suggests that there was a gap between anti-abortion and pro-legalization writers. Although the medical writers’ texts disparaged the Church, Catholic theologians did not engage in a direct response. For this reason, abortion discourse in the Great Depression cannot be characterized as a disagreement between Catholics and Jews.

Whereas the Catholic writers claimed to reject eugenicist ideas, the physicians who published pro-legalization monographs were proud of their open affiliations with the eugenics movement. In the early 20th century, eugenic sterilization legislation “was part of a wave of Progressive Era public health activism.” Just as these Catholic writers saw themselves as welcoming the dawn of a more moral era, these medical writers considered themselves part of a liberal movement to improve the collective American community. Physician William Robinson was strongest in his pro-eugenics stance; in fact, his 1934 book The Law Against Abortion was published by the Eugenics Publishing Company. Yet his arguments rang similarly to the anti-eugenics Catholic writers. While the Jesuit Michael Williams wrote about pagans who would infiltrate civilization and threaten the future of “the race,” Robinson wrote that those who opposed contraception were “the real destroyers of the life of the race” because they advocated for reproduction “among epileptics, syphilites, idiots, imbeciles, and the feeble-minded.”

---

68 Mears, “In Fear and Secret,” 65.
70 Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 17.
Similarly, Jewish physician A.J. Rongy wrote that sterilizing criminals would improve the state
of society.\textsuperscript{71} Rongy was not even particularly supportive of abortion; he argued that it would be
best if people did not have abortions, but that abortions were necessary to keep the population in
check. These serious and blatantly eugenicist ideas continued to influence reproductive health
policy well past eugenics went out of favor.\textsuperscript{72}

These three physicians’ use of eugenicist ideas are disturbing in and of themselves, but
they are particularly shocking considering the writers’ identities as first-generation Jewish
immigrants.\textsuperscript{73} In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Jews were often turned away from entering the United
States if they were not determined to be in “good physique.”\textsuperscript{74} On the surface, this policy seemed
to ensure that immigrants would be able to survive in their new country; in practice, it was a
thinly veiled attempt to limit the American genetic pool to only those perceived as the
“strongest.”\textsuperscript{75} These Jewish writers could not have known in that in that very decade, Hitler
would draw inspiration from American eugenic policies to begin a genocide. Only during World
War II, when American propaganda began portraying eugenics as Nazism, did support for the
movement in name begin to fade (or at least change).\textsuperscript{76} Abortion access, these medical writers

\textsuperscript{71} Rongy, \textit{Abortion: Legal or Illegal?} 149.
\textsuperscript{72} Stern, “Sterilized in the Name of Public Health.”
\textsuperscript{73} Williams, \textit{Defenders of the Unborn}, 24.
\textsuperscript{74} Baynton, \textit{Defectives in the Land}, 32.
\textsuperscript{75} The pressure to appear physically fit was so strong that Jewish immigrants’ rights groups argued that because
Orthodox Jews were unable to eat the food provided on the ship, they were being turned away in disproportionate
numbers because they appeared to be starving. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the National Origins Act of
1924 both used eugenic rational to limit the ethnicities allowed to enter the United States to only those seen as
genetically desirable. Often hailing from Eastern Europe, Jewish immigrants were limited in their ability to
immigrate. In 1913, Alfred C. Reed, a physician working for the Public Health Service, wrote that Jews had a
“predisposition to functional insanities” and that “strict enforcement of the present medical laws [would]
automatically exclude these races to a sufficient extent.” See Baynton, \textit{Defectives in the Land}, 30 and 40. See also
Alfred C. Reed, “Immigration and the Public Health,” \textit{Popular Science Monthly}, October 1913, 325, quoted in
\textsuperscript{76} Eugenic thought pervades to this day in the form of family planning and population control. See Anne
Hendrixson, “Population Control in the Troubled Present: The ‘120 by 20’ Target and Implant Access Program,”
argued, would yield a stronger society by eliminating genetic strains that tend toward poverty
and crime. Anti-abortion Catholics had opposed this line of argument all along.

ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN ABORTION DISCOURSE

Because these pro-legalization physicians saw abortion as the safest option for society,
they often referred to anti-abortion positions as “archaic,” a characterization based in anti-
Catholic rhetoric. William Robinson, ever a dramatist, began his pro-legalization book The Law
Against Abortion with an evocative statement: “in the beginning there was Infanticide.” He
explained that long ago, “superfluous or unwanted children were simply killed off—exposed to
the elements, thrown into the river or drowned in a tub, suffocated or poisoned.” However, he
said, “Then came Abortion.” In evoking Genesis 1:1, Robinson tied religion not with birth but
rather with the death that comes from restricting reproductive healthcare. Much like how
Robinson referred to abortion as a “blessing,” he associated abortion with the light that God
brought to the world at the beginning of time. He did not clarify exactly when this time before
abortion occurred, but Robinson implied that it was a time when Christianity reigned. “Only
perverted minds living in impenetrable medieval darkness still believe or claim to believe that
prevention of pregnancy is equivalent to the interruption of pregnancy and that both are
equivalent to murder or even worse than murder,” he said. Writing in 1934, Robinson was
clearly referencing Catholic doctrine as articulated in Casti Connubii. According to Robinson,
“the Church” was the main reason that abortion laws remained restricted. Although he

---
77 Emphasis in the original text. Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 5.
78 Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 5.
80 Pius XI, Casti Connubii, Sec. 56.
81 Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 32.
primarily blamed the Catholic Church, he also seemed to lump the Catholic Church together with all of Christianity or even religion in general. “I have no quarrel with the churches; Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Mohammedan for their attitude toward abortion,” Robinson wrote. “Such are their beliefs and with religious beliefs we cannot quarrel or argue.” Robinson argued that those who opposed abortion because of their religious beliefs were so beyond help that there was no point in arguing.

William Robinson was not the only pro-legalization physician with a theory as to how ancient humans thought about abortion: physician A.J. Rongy argued that pre-Christian “tribes” saw abortion as a less-emotionally painful alternative to infanticide designed to keep the population low to maintain a sustainable food supply. He contended that ancient Greek and Roman pagans practiced abortion as a practical response to population changes, and that Americans ought to return to their way of understanding reproductive matters. This change was already happening, he argued, but Catholics stood in its way. “Today it is manifest that a counter-revolution is taking place against the Hebrew-Christian viewpoint,” Rongy wrote. “The pendulum is swinging back until we are now once again close to the ancient ways of thought; this to the Vatican signifies a revived threat of paganism.” Rongy argued that the Church was hypocritical for mimicking pagan holidays but refusing to accept pagan approaches to birth. He claimed that early Christian leaders had not cared about abortion, but rather called it immoral to put themselves in competition with Greek and Roman pagans. The opposition to abortion stemmed from an ancient ploy to attract new converts, resulting in what Rongy called the most

82 Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 32.
83 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 10.
84 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 29.
86 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 42.
87 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 18.
88 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 29.
remarkable change that Christianity brought to the Western world. Rongy wrote that “not at any time until the coming of the Christian Church was the propriety or morality of the destruction of the foetus before it had ‘quickened,’” which was typically in the second trimester of pregnancy, “ever challenged.” According to Rongy, the Catholic Church was so backward that even ancient pagans were more medically advanced.

Like Robinson, Rongy isolated the Roman Catholic Church as a particularly hypocritical and progress-averse tradition, writing that the Church’s obsession with the ensoulment of the fetus had wreaked havoc on secular laws. Rongy wrote that “once the subject [of abortion] has been stripped of the supernatural taboos with which it has been surrounded, the way [would] be indicated for dealing with it rationally in accordance with the needs of an intelligent and happier society.” The word “taboos” called back to William Robinson’s claim that the Church’s views were “dark and savage.” The use of the word “dark” illustrated Catholics as ignorant, but it also was racially charged in a way that replicated anti-Catholic arguments against Italian and Irish immigrants. Similarly, the word “savage” reinforced the racial hierarchies theorized by eugenicists like Robinson. Rongy argued that by opposing abortion, Catholics associated themselves with “primitive” people rather than the medical and social progress represented by whiteness. These medical writers degraded Catholics and their superstitious approaches to reproductive health as unadvanced.

The prevalence of anti-Catholicism in these physicians’ arguments about abortion may be explained by the fact that these physicians were Jewish. Throughout the 1930s, anti-Semitic violence was on the rise, and conflicts between Catholics and Jews were common. Especially in

89 Rongy, *Abortion: Legal or Illegal?* 18.
90 Rongy, *Abortion: Legal or Illegal?* 44.
91 Rongy, *Abortion: Legal or Illegal?* 212.
the Northeast, cities split into ethnic neighborhoods with separate Jewish and Catholic sections, with what one reporter described as “recognized trouble zones” in between.\(^{93}\) It should be noted here that although Catholics were also limited in their ability to succeed socially and economically, Jews faced more immediate threats of violence, which sometimes came from the Catholics themselves. Charles Coughlin, a popular radio priest based in Detroit, espoused anti-Semitic views on his show throughout the 1930s by claiming that Jews deserved the persecution they faced in Germany.\(^ {94}\) In 1938, his radio sermons inspired the creation of Christian Front, an anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi group with chapters across the country.\(^ {95}\) Shaken by the financial impacts of the Depression and riled up with anti-Communist energy from the Spanish Civil War, Irish Catholics flooded the Christian Front’s membership. In New York City, the organization’s headquarters, 90% of Christian Front members were Irish-Catholic.\(^ {96}\) Christian Front rallies instructed followers to “liquidate the Jews in America” and its publications referred to Hitler as “the savoir of Europe.”\(^ {97}\) They boycotted Jewish businesses and even hatched a plan to bomb Jewish-owned movie theaters in New York City. Catholic leaders in New York did little to combat or acknowledge the violence. Bishop Francis A. McIntyre referred to anti-Semitic vandalism as “chalk doodlings” that he claimed paid agents were using to disgrace Catholics with the “phantom of anti-Semitic hate.”\(^ {98}\) The anti-Catholic tendencies of the pro-legalization movement may have been a defensive response to anti-Semitism perpetuated by Catholics.


\(^{96}\) Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 121.

\(^{97}\) Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, 121.

As Catholics perpetuated anti-Semitism, they themselves were still experiencing discrimination. Historian Kevin Schultz calls both anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism “casually pervasive throughout the United States during the interwar years.”99 In the decades before the Great Depression, the Ku Klux Klan experienced a resurgence in the anti-immigrant nativism sentiment that was popular among most Americans.100 The Prohibition Movement had drawn on these racist arguments with its anti-Catholic rhetoric.101 For Catholics, the Great Depression made life especially difficult. The financial downturn triggered a rise in nativism, meaning Catholics could have trouble finding jobs or places to live.102 In 1933, the United States senate had only five Catholic senators.103 Anti-Catholicism became harsher during the Great Depression as the Spanish Civil War broke out, with many American Catholics siding with Francisco Franco, who sought to overthrow the more secularist government.104 Their support of Franco fed into the discriminatory narrative in the Protestant majority United States Catholics were inherently anti-democratic puppets of the Vatican. In this way, Catholics were excluded from American belonging.

Encountering nativism and anti-Catholicism, American Catholics struggled to define their relationship to nationhood. This struggle became central to discourse around abortion during the Great Depression, as physicians arguing for abortion’s legalization deployed anti-Catholic rhetoric. In their own publications, anti-abortion Catholic theologians levied language that associated Catholic identity with social advancement.

---

100 Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 17.
CATHOLIC WRITERS AND THE PAGAN

Throughout the 1930s, Catholic journal articles about reproduction often called those who supported birth control and abortion “pagan.” This polemical technique was not intended to imply that those who support abortion identified as Pagans practicing under the umbrella of earth-based, generally polytheistic spiritualities. Rather, the epithet “pagan” was designed to criticize all people who supported or ignored abortion. Most importantly, the category of “pagan” when evoked, as it often was in Catholic journals, served to mark abortion as fundamentally un-Catholic. Although abortion was mentioned frequently in the journal Commonweal, for example, most of these references to abortion were not full-fledged articles, but rather off-hand remarks in articles about other subjects claiming that no real Catholic would support abortion. Published in The Linacre Quarterly, the official magazine of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Guilds, J. Gerard Mears’ condemnation of physicians who provided abortions was much more direct. Mears wrote, “To an extent that shocks even a pagan conscious, uncounted thousands of human beings, created by God but unwanted by their parents, are being murdered as they are wrenched into this world by criminal abortionists.”105 In other words, the crime of abortion was so horrific that even someone with an inferior sense of morality ought to be shocked. Mears presented paganism as the lowest form of being an ethical person. Beyond these Catholic periodicals, there was precedence for using “pagan” as an insult in this way—precedence set by the Vatican. Casti Connubii explained that any woman who made herself equal to her husband “descend[ed] from her truly regal throne” and became “as amongst the pagans.”106 In this way, the Catholic use of “pagan” as a pejorative placed Catholicism at the top of a moral hierarchy.

105 Mears, “In Fear and in Secret,” 64.
106 Pius XI, Casti Connubii, Sec. 75.
In using the word “pagan” to describe their opponents, these Catholic writers characterized those who supported or tolerated abortion as belonging to an ancient era. Quoted in a 1937 issue of the *New York Times*, the Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Guilds (FCPG) referred to physicians who supported the use of contraception as ascribing to “pagan and irrational philosophies” that were “based the [sic] modern creeds of unlimited sex indulgence.” Although technically a quotation responding to the use of contraception, FCPG’s statement did not distinguish between birth control and abortion, claiming that “God alone [was] the absolute master of man and his destiny” while “man [was] only the responsible steward of life.” By describing those who support contraception as “pagan and irrational,” FCPG reinforced violent language that described non-Christian cultures as primitive and preserved in a time before reason. And yet, the FCPG’s claims about Catholicism were slightly more complex, as the statement associated paganism with “modern” sexual excess. In this way, FCPG linked the threat of pagan irrationality with the uncertainty of the modern era, evoking in its readers an urgency to save humanity before it regresses into the pre-Christian darkness.

For Catholic anti-abortion writers, this tactic went beyond just dismissing their rivals as irrelevant: Catholic writers framed the “pagan” philosophy of supporting reproductive healthcare as an existential threat to the nation. The FCPG refused to “align itself with any doctors who by their adherence to a pagan philosophy… [made] the medical practitioner the grave-digger to the nation.” In other words, the “pagan” tendencies of doctors who provided contraception and abortion were not merely misguided, but the murderers of innocent Americans. Although this quotation referred more directly to physicians’ support of contraception, Catholic writers portrayed birth control as leading down a slippery slope to abortion, and later to the complete

---

paganization of the country. A 1931 article in *Commonweal* accused “the main body of American Protestantism” of “surrender[ing] unconditionally to secularism,” displaying the intertwined nature of Protestantism, secularism, and paganism in Catholic anti-abortion rhetoric.109 The article continued to argue that “legalized contraception would be a long step on the road toward state clinics for abortion, for compulsory sterilization of those declared unfit by fatal eugenists [sic], and the ultimate destruction of human liberty at the hands of an absolute pagan state.”110 These Catholic writers tied reproductive technologies to the downfall of the nation by depicting contraception, abortion, and eugenics as the ultimate threat.

THE CIVILIZING PROJECT

To grasp the significance of these Catholic claims about nationhood and abortion, it is important to understand the social position of American Catholics during the Great Depression. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, xenophobic politicians, religious figures, and social commentators portrayed Catholics as the puppets of the Vatican, rendering Catholic faith antithetical to democracy and quintessentially un-American.111 Rampant nativism had left Catholic immigrants and their second- and third-generation descendants in a defensive position.112 American Catholics argued vehemently over what it meant to be both Catholic and American. Was their allegiance primarily to the Vatican or to the United States government? Ought they attempt to assimilate to improve their financial situation, or did American Catholics have a moral obligation to keep themselves separated? The intensity of this argument increased

---

when Irish Catholics began to gain more social prestige and economic power as they rose above the working class and began to take more control over the Church in America.\textsuperscript{113} Some Catholics, called the Americanists, believed that Catholics should do their best to integrate into American society. Conservatives, on the other hand, argued that American Catholics needed to maintain their ties with the Vatican and attempt to distance themselves from non-Catholic Americans. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII sought to settle the controversy with an apostolic letter called \textit{Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae} that primarily aligned with those who thought Catholic Americans should not assimilate.\textsuperscript{114} The letter ultimately condemned Americanism as heresy. \textit{Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae} lead to Catholic reticence to identify as fully American, and it fueled anti-Catholic rhetoric that portrayed the Church as antithetical to progress.\textsuperscript{115} During the Great Depression, physicians arguing for abortion’s legalization drew from this rhetoric to criticize the Church.

When these Catholic writers claimed that abortion presented a pagan threat to the nation, they were expressing personal concern over a nation that had shut them out. In encouraging Catholics to see themselves as a people apart from other Americans, Pope Leo XIII paved the way for Catholic anti-abortion theologians to see themselves as morally superior and therefore the divinely appointed defenders of the nation from ethical degradation. These Catholic writers

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{113} Throughout this paper, “the Church” refers to the Roman Catholic Church.
\textsuperscript{114} Cummings, \textit{New Women of the Old Faith}, 7.
\textsuperscript{115} In his book \textit{Tri-Faith America}, Kevin Schultz argues that in the 1920s, “tri-faith” cooperation between Christians, Protestants, and Jews became more common. The National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) launched the Goodwill Movement—a collaboration between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to advocate for inter-religious work. Its chief objective was not only to foster cooperation but also to promote the idea that Catholics and Jews belonged in the United States, untied with Protestants under the banner of religious tolerance. The NCCJ organized Tolerance Trios—groups made up of a Jewish rabbi, a Protestant minister, and a Catholic priest—to travel around the country and stage photographs in the name of tolerance. This era proved a turning point in Catholic insularity, but the fact that Tolerance Trios attracted the attention of reporters eager to cover the incident of Catholic clergy cooperating with clergy from other religious traditions illustrates the tensions that continued. See Schultz, \textit{Tri-Faith America}, 17 and 29.
\end{small}
attempted to change reproductive health policies and practices in order to preserve their vision of a civilized nation, unmarked by the dark philosophies of paganism. When the editor of America Wilfried Parsons asked, “what place has [contraception] in a democracy?” he was claiming the Catholic right to be American. His reference to the shared value of democracy stood in tension with Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae. Michael Williams’ claim in Commonweal that Catholics must “fight together to recapture the citadel of civilization” characterized Catholics as the defenders of American morality. Through this militaristic rhetoric, anti-abortion Catholic theologians positioned themselves as public moralists with the power to mold a more perfect American society.

Although Catholics were among the few intellectual groups to oppose eugenics in the 1930s, Catholics were not isolated from eugenic ideas. American Catholics lived in a social world determined by race and ethnicity, in which Catholics struggled not only with being labeled as un-American but also with being cast as non-white. In a 1907 assessment of “Ethnic Factors in the Population of Boston,” Sociologist Frederick Bushee wrote that “the present immigration of southern Italians brings a large superfluous population of hot-headed men who are fit only for unskilled labor.” Similarly, the Irish were prone to “natural weakness” due to the “exceptionally large number of defectives among them,” which was only accompanied by their “social and moral degeneracy.” These ethnic stereotypes were engrained within Catholic self-understandings as well. Although eugenics was losing popularity in American scientific circles during the 1930s, Catholic historian John McGreevy argues that “for American Catholic liberals, burdened with a Church structure frequently defined by notions of national and ‘racial’

116 Williams, “Murder Will Shout,” 448.
118 Bushee, “Ethnic Factors,” 83.
difference, the process of eliminating traditional categories was painstaking.”119 Separated into neighborhoods separated by ethnic identity, Catholics were in a hierarchical contest between immigrant groups. This social system put many Catholics in a world of ethnic competition. “Irish and Germans,” McGreevy writes, “became ‘Catholic whites’ only in the context of African-Americans moving in large numbers to a particular area.”120 The ethnic rankings that they ascribed to may not have been as essentialist as those prevalent among eugenicist scientists, but they were rankings nonetheless. For these Catholic writers, claiming the right to direct the nation’s morality meant attempting to move themselves upward on the social hierarchy as they sought to argue for their concept of a more advanced civilization.

In this way, these Catholic writers’ nationalistic project shared something in common with eugenicist rhetoric. Recently, scholars have argued that eugenics did not decline in the 1920s, but rather continued into the 1930s by transforming in nature.121 While eugenicists could no longer credibly point to scientific evidence to support their projects of national advancement, they could invoke narratives of self-improvement that were less directly related to limiting the birth of certain types of people.122 In this way, eugenics became “popular” by becoming diffused throughout cultural assumptions around improvement. These Catholic anti-abortion writers were not eugenicist: they directly opposed eugenics in their writing. However, there are ways in which their arguments resonated with eugenicist ideas around communal advancement. These Catholic theologians were arguing for reproductive control (in the form of ending abortion access) to produce a more civilized society; eugenicists also argued for reproductive control (in the form of

119 McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 50.
120 McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 36.
121 Currell, Popular Eugenics, 2.
mandating sterilization) to produce a more civilized society. This resonance is important because it highlights the ways that conversations around reproductive healthcare decentered reproductive freedom in favor of national advancement.

For example, many anti-abortion Catholic theologians crafted arguments against abortion around their understandings of nationhood. Disability studies scholar Douglas Baynton argues that “eugenics was primarily a nationalistic project.”\textsuperscript{123} The politics of nation-building was intertwined with eugenics, and conversations about eugenics were anchored to nationalism. Jesuit writer J. Gerard Mears, decried abortion, writing that “it seem[ed] impossible that such a heinous commerce [could] thrive in a Christian—or even a civilized society.”\textsuperscript{124} For the United States to become truly civilized, it must leave abortion in its past, he argued. In an article against contraception, another Jesuit named Wilfried Parsons wrote, “What place has all this business [contraception] in a democracy? The answer is, none.”\textsuperscript{125} To these writers, abortion was fundamentally opposed to civilization and democracy. Abortion and contraception were pagan relics of the past that have been charged with modern sexual immorality. These elements were contradictory to the future that these Catholic writers envisioned for the United States.

In imagining this American future, anti-abortion theologians entangled reproductive health with eugenicist-adjacent language about preserving the greatness of white, Christian civilization. In a 1935 \textit{Commonweal} article about contraception, Michael Williams called physicians who provide birth control “vendors of the devil’s dope.”\textsuperscript{126} As the founder of \textit{Commonweal} who served as its editor from 1924 to 1938, Williams’ opinions were of

\textsuperscript{123} Baynton, \textit{Defectives in the Land}, 12.
\textsuperscript{124} Mears, “In Fear and in Secret,” 67.
\textsuperscript{125} Wilfried Parsons, “A Crisis in Birth Control,” \textit{America} 54, no. 4 (May 1935): 81.
\textsuperscript{126} Michael Williams, “Murder Will Shout,” 447.
particularly important significance. In his article “Murder Will Shout,” Williams argued that contraception and abortion were indistinguishable because girls would turn to abortion after discovering the ineffectiveness of birth control. He wrote that advertisements for birth control were “expressly meant to attract American girls—not married women, but the millions of young unmarried women forming that great group which the Christian civilization yesterday so genuinely respected, and protected: the maidenhood of the nation, the very fountain source of human life, the potential wives and mothers of the race.” Birth control was not just for unmarried girls, but rather unmarried American girls. These girls’ duty as the “maidenhood of the nation” made the threat of their disgrace through abortion that much greater. The language in this quotation bespeaks the power of whiteness: these American girls were described as “that great group” and as the “mothers of the race.” Williams’ concern over the continuation of the American race, juxtaposed with Protestant conceptions of Catholics as inherently un-American, were a clear attempt to assert Catholic control over the formation of “Christian civilization.” In this way, he intertwined the reproductive futures of those accessing abortions with the moral future of the nation.

In the final, provocative sentence of Williams’ article, he captured the intensity of the fight against paganism. He wrote that moral people needed to unite to save civilization:

Is it still possible for the practical (not merely superficial Christians, and those Jews who yet are faithful to the religion of Israel[]), to agree in this hour of the change in the tide of the time—this hour when if religious men and women so decide, an act of will may still determine the inner (and, therefore, ultimately, the exterior) nature and character of the new age the world is moving toward—I say, is there yet time for such men and women to

128 Williams, “Murder Will Shout,” 448.
come together and form a common front to oppose the pagans who have passed our gates, and fight together to recapture the citadel of civilization?129

This conglomerate sentence is a goldmine of Catholic Depression Era anti-abortion rhetoric. Williams grouped the “superficial Christians” together with those he considered to be faithful Jews, which suggested that both groups could be included under the charge of paganism. Like other Catholic writers, Williams disparaged these weak Christians and faithful Jews as irrational by arguing that only the “practical” would be intelligent enough to join the fight against paganism. The responsibility of these fighters was quasi-messianic, as their duty is to direct the “new age the world is moving toward.” Finally, this battle to which they have been summoned portrayed the nation as gated, and the fighters were called to keep the undesirables out. When the accusation of “paganism” was combined with the rhetoric of defending civilization, it became clear that these Catholic arguments about abortion were about much more than the morality of abortion. By portraying the other side as “archaic” or “pagan,” anti-abortion Catholic theologians sought to influence reproductive health policy in a way that would bring the United States into a shining future—one over which their minority voices had control.

The supersessionist language of Williams’ article was neither unique nor new in Catholic discourse. In 1930, five years before Williams published “Murder Will Shout,” Casti Connubii laid the groundwork for this line of thought. Seeking to prevent Catholic women from using birth control or having abortions, Pope Pius XI called on Catholics to preserve the sanctity of marriage:

The Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals, standing erect in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through Our mouth proclaims anew: any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of

129 Williams, “Murder Will Shout,” 448.
God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.\textsuperscript{130}

In this encyclical, Pope Pius XI made it clear that the Church was God’s bastion of morality within humankind. The Church—which was gendered female—must be protected from the impending threat of sexual sin. \textit{Casti Connubii} also clarified that it was “the duty of public authority… to defend the lives of the innocent” from “death at the hands of doctors,” which partially pinned the burden of responsibility on the state to prevent abortion. However, most of the pressure to maintain sexual morality rested on women. If a woman refused to obey her husband, she would fall from her heavenly throne and into a state of paganism and enslavement.\textsuperscript{131} To use contraception or have an abortion was to desecrate oneself and disobey God. In this way, anti-abortion Catholic arguments placed the burden of the Church’s and the nation’s morality on women.

\section*{DECENTERING WOMEN}

The Vatican placed immense pressure on people who could become pregnant to avoid abortion at a time when the state of reproductive healthcare was dire. Effective and safe contraception was inaccessible even to the wealthy. By the 1930s, Latex condoms had become available, but they did not gain popularity until World War II.\textsuperscript{132} Even for the wealthiest Americans, birth control remained unsafe and inaccessible: from 1930 to 1950, the most common form of birth control was douching with Lysol.\textsuperscript{133} To get an abortion from a licensed

\begin{footnotes}
\item Pius XI, \textit{Casti Connubii}, Sec. 56.
\item Pius XI, \textit{Casti Connubii}, Sec. 75.
\item Caron, \textit{Who Chooses?} 84.
\item In addition to using Lysol as a spermicide, people also used Lysol to self-induce abortion. A 1969 study found that without having an emergency hysterectomy, 60\% of women who had complications from douching with Lysol died, typically of sepsis or kidney failure. For the popularity of Lysol as an abortifacient, see Caron, \textit{Who Chooses?} 84. For the 1969 study, see Robert H. Bartlett and Clement Yahia, “Management of Septic Chemical Abortion with
\end{footnotes}
physician, pregnant people in some states could find a medical professional who could declare their abortion “therapeutic,” meaning that the procedure was necessary for their health.\textsuperscript{134} Wealthy, white women were far more likely to have access to a physician, have the money to pay them, and be believed enough to have their abortion certified as “therapeutic.” Whether a well-respected physician would help a pregnant person often depended on their perception of her “honorableness,” a concept coded with class-based and racial significance. Most abortions were likely self-induced or done with the help of a midwife using herbal abortifacients or inserting a sharp object through the cervix. Those who provided abortions illegally used household objects that would not be immediately recognized as abortion instruments if caught. The Museum of Contraception and Abortion in Amsterdam has a collection of dilators designed to look like knitting needles.\textsuperscript{135} Their collection of abortion instruments also includes is a kitchen table, a common and convenient place for illegal abortions.\textsuperscript{136}

Not all Depression Era abortion conversations ignored women. In arguing for abortion’s legalization, physicians A.J. Rongy and Willian Robinson discussed the stories of suffering women they served as physicians. Neither physicians wrote that they provided abortions (which would have been legal so long as they certified the abortion as “therapeutic”), but they had plenty of experience caring for people who attempted to self-induce. Robinson in particular showed sympathy even for unmarried young women. In one case, he wrote about a young woman who sought medical help after paying for an illegal abortion only to have two physicians attempt to cajole her into exposing the person who had provided the abortion. “This little slip of

\textsuperscript{134}Griffith, \textit{Moral Combat}, 205.
a girl,” Robinson wrote, “though she lived in illicit relations with the man she cared for, and
though she had an abortion produced on herself, towers morally head and shoulders above those
two members of the medical profession… She is to them what Mount Everest is to a
dunghill.”137 For the time, this was an incredibly charitable view of this young woman,
especially considering that Robinson did not think that abortion was morally excusable.138
Similarly, Rongy seemed shaken by the number of women he attended who bled out in their beds
or died of infection after an illegal abortion.139 These pro-legalization physicians prioritized
bearing witness to the suffering that people experienced trying to access abortion care.

On the other hand, Catholic anti-abortion theologians did not reference stories about
individual women, but rather focused on the moral condition of the whole society. This
discrepancy may have been present because the pro-legalization writers had personal experience
with caring for women. Still, the extent to which Catholic anti-abortion arguments excluded the
needs of women was extreme. Typically, women were only evoked in reference to their duty to
improve the moral state of the nation. In this way, male theologians writing against abortion
charged women with a high degree of responsibility at the expense of their own reproductive
autonomy. A woman who failed her duties as a potential wife and mother by having an abortion
not only condemned herself, but also the entirety of civilization.

137 Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 108.
138 Throughout The Law Against Abortion, Robinson’s arguments were primarily utilitarian. “Abortion is an evil,”
he wrote, “and an evil it will always remain. But sometimes a very necessary evil.” Yet Robinson continued, arguing
that “a necessary evil may sometimes be regarded in the light of a blessing.” The term “blessing” implied that
abortion itself is from God. For Robinson, the tension between abortion as an “evil” and abortion as a “blessing”
were easily resolved by the realization that abortion was “necessary,” not only for a pregnant person who needs one,
but for society at large. Robinson’s fellow pro-legalization physician A.J. Rongy contributed to this type of
utilitarian argument by acknowledging that the Great Depression’s rise in abortions could be traced to economic
inequality, and that the continued abortion ban would threaten the lives of poor women and Black women. Access to
safe abortion, even if morally ambiguous, had the power to increase the happiness and longevity of people across the
economic classes. See Robinson, The Law Against Abortion, 25 and Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 111 and
104.
139 Rongy, Abortion: Legal or Illegal? 147.
These male, anti-abortion theologians spun this narrative during a time when American women faced incredible suffering due to the financial crash. For many families struggling through the Great Depression, having more children was not an option. Unable to feed their children, mothers in Florida wrote to the government asking for aid. “My heart aches for my babies,” one mother, Juanita Mayers, wrote in 1936. “It is not thier [sic] faults nor mine for I have tried I’ve never even asked so far for one thing for my children to eat or wear. I see no way but to put my children in a home and I’d rather see them dead than in one. No matter how good a home is mothers love isn’t there.”

In 1930, another mother, Ada Sorenson, described struggling to feed her children, writing, “I am a widow left with eleven 11 [sic] children to take care of... I am trying to keep them all in school if I can but it is a hard task to take care of eleven children and keep my place up to [sic] with the expenses I have with them all.”

The lack of employment left these women with large families utterly desperate. “I have a family of 7 + no one to work but my self [sic] & I can’t get no imployment [sic] in the Packing house,” Massie Garritt wrote in 1937. “I have a sick husband has been down two years helpless as to work & he need [sic] medicine & can’t have it [. ] me no work [. ] Please help us if you Possible.”

Across the country, orphanages were completely packed, and charitable institutions were unable to match the needs of suffering families. The amount of suffering that women experienced as they tried to care for large families cannot be understated. Disconnected from the needs of women, male theologians wrote articles condemning those who needed abortion care just to survive.

---

142 Green, *Looking for the New Deal*, 150.
CONCLUSION

In the Great Depression, arguments over abortion were more about defending discriminatory visions of social advancement than the morality of abortion. In this way, Catholic anti-abortion arguments became a container for anxieties over sexuality and civilization. These conversations ultimately ignored the pain of pregnant people struggling through the Great Depression. In a similar way, modern debates over abortion often focus on the well-being of the fetus over the pregnant person. Today, many evangelical Protestant denominations have zeroed in on abortion as a key political issue.\footnote{144}{Carol Mason, \textit{Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Nature of Pro-Life Politics} (Cornell University Press, 2018).} Scholars have argued that the evangelical interest in abortion began in the 1970s as right-wing religious actors sought to fill the space that fighting against civil rights had left.\footnote{145}{Randall Herbert Balmer, \textit{Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America, an Evangelical's Lament} (New York: Basic Books, 2006).} These trends beg the question: are abortion debates ever just about the morality of abortion? In the case of the Great Depression, anti-abortion Catholic theologians appeared more concerned with their ability to preserve the morality of the nation than with the health and safety of women.

Although abortion remains an outlet for expressing social anxieties today, there are ways in which Depression Era discourse differs from modern abortion discourse. The fact that Protestants did not comment on this abortion argument throughout the Great Depression suggests that the discourse is capable of change—that religious actors can shift their positions and their perspectives. Similarly, the irrelevance of frameworks centered on “choice” is striking. This change in abortion discourse suggests that the relationship between religion and abortion not be shoe-horned into relatively new concepts and categories—ones that, during the Great Depression, were not even on the horizon.
In addition, scholars and activists must recognize the all-encompassing role that eugenics played in early 20th century abortion discourse, especially for the physicians who argued for abortion’s legalization. This paper sheds some much-needed light on the integral role of eugenics in the origins of the pro-choice movement. Majority-white reproductive rights organizations have been reticent to acknowledge this past, and scholarship fails to address the issue as thoroughly as it deserves. A conscious and careful acknowledgment of this eugenicist past is the only way to examine the ways that eugenics lives on in discourse about abortion and religion today. It also highlights the need for Reproductive Justice frameworks that center the needs of people of color and holistic family care. By thinking of women as tools for creating a “civilized” America, anti-abortion Catholic theologians disregarded the needs of the poor people who needed access to reproductive care most.

Finally, this paper calls for additional scholarship on abortion and religion in the Great Depression. Despite the dearth of primary sources, this topic provides fruitful ground for exploring Catholic visions of civilization, eugenic thought in reproduction, and the way that abortion discourse assigns moral responsibility to women. Focusing on the writings of Catholic theologians also begs the question of how clergy masculinity influenced opinions on abortion. How did celibate clergymen encounter reproductive issues in their personal lives? For those that were priests, how did Casti Connubii impact their engagement with parishioners? Catholic theologians’ journal articles provide a limited perspective—one that ignores the opinions of

---


147 SisterSong, the organization whose members created the Reproductive Justice framework, defines Reproductive Justice as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” SisterSong, “Reproductive Justice,” accessed April 6, 2021, https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice.
women. Catholic women were not given the space in these journals to write about the issues that affected them most. When abortion was illegal and impoverished women had to perform the procedure on their kitchen tables, where and how did they reflect on their experiences? These articles cannot capture what women thought as they listened to priests condemn abortion while desperate women bouncing babies on their laps filled the pews.
References


Taussig, Frederick J. Abortion: Spontaneous and Induced, Medical and Social Aspects. St. Louis, MO: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1936.

