



## Editorial

### Reconsidering Eugenics in Science and Religion Scholarship: A Reflection and Invitation

The field of science and religion studies is in need of a historical reconsideration of the eugenic era. This reconsideration must include the close ties between the development of evolutionary sciences and eugenic philosophies in the early twentieth century, the related intersections of early evolutionary theologies with eugenics, and the legacy of the connections between anti-evolution and anti-eugenic views in the religious public. Since most would mark the beginning of contemporary science/religion conversations with the published works of Ian Barbour and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, it is also important to reconsider their works as well as those who published and critiqued such works. What role did eugenic philosophies have in the development of the modern field of theological considerations of science, and in what ways have eugenic philosophies been ignored, erased, or supported during the development of this field? It is past time for the science/religion community to seriously consider these questions. I am grateful for the space here to consider this question, and grateful further for a thematic section of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* on this topic in the future.

### A Recent History of Reconsidering the Past

After the mass protests over the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many corporations, scholarly organizations, journals, and governments reconsidered their past to interrogate whether racism and other biases may have played a role in the construction and sustenance of their organizations. This seems an unequivocal moral good: moral clarity of the past allows for moral clarity of the



present and the future, an ethical judgment equally true for societies, individuals, organizations, and disciplines but perhaps most true for those who aim to move forward religious and theological understandings of God and the world.

In this wave of historical reconsiderations, the majority of published statements concerned reaffirming stances against any and all things racist. These statements were usually followed with some sort of pledge for action, such as donating community service hours, starting a scholarship fund, or pledging to employ more workers of color (Friedman 2020). For scholarly and professional organizations, such statements were usually the limit of their solidarity, but on a few occasions, an organization produced a comprehensive report considering the nature of complicity in its history. Such reports are a rarity in the scholarly world and nonexistent in the corporate world. Three are worth considering.

First, the American Psychological Association (APA) published a sweeping study that attempted to detail the historical failings of the association and apologize, quite directly, to people it harmed. The APA (2021) “failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology,” the study begins, “was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of people of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives.” It continues boldly, “The APA is profoundly sorry, accepts responsibility for, and owns the actions and inactions of APA itself, the discipline of psychology, and individual psychologists who stood as leaders for the organization and field” (APA 2021). The organization then laid out a plan for action based on this reconsideration and followed up a year later with another report, a US\$1.1 million call for grant applications, and an expanded online presence. The organization has since transitioned this work into more regular work on equity, diversity, and inclusion and seems to be holding true to its original goals.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) published a landmark report in January 2023 (ASHG 2023a). The report includes the history of the ASHG in relationship to the American eugenics movement and commits the ASHG to multiple equity-focused actions over the next several years, including pledging to “prioritize DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] objectives” in its 2023 strategic plan (ASHG 2023b). Similar to the APA’s report, the ASHG report evaluates both the complicated history of the ASHG as well as the legacy of genetics in general. Given the recency of this report, it is unclear whether its stated goals will be continued in the life of ASHG as a whole beyond the initial wake of publication.

Third, University College London (UCL) began a self-study in 2018 and published their own groundbreaking report in 2020, tracing in detail the ways in which UCL “played a fundamental role in the development, propagation, and legitimisation of eugenics” (UCL 2021; cf. UCL 2024). While this report was not in response to the 2020 protests, the systematic nature of the report

and the continued commitment to follow-up actions mark it as one of the most impressive systematic efforts to emerge from this period of racial and eugenic reconsideration among scholarly organizations.

Other scholarly organizations published reflections, but not to the extent of APA, ASHG, or UCL. The eminent scientific journals *Nature* and *Science*, for example, each reflected briefly on their past and the need for further action. *Nature* (2022) published an editorial in September 2022 that pointed to the failings in the history of the journal. The editors referenced the journal's complicity in the rise of eugenics, highlighting the aforementioned UCL report. *Nature* has since published multiple editorials and essays on its "racist legacy" (Nobles et al. 2022), even updating the reporting checklist for potential authors to include whether and how authors have described people "according to race, ethnicity, or other socially constructed categories" (*Nature* 2023). These steps attempt to "keep research from inadvertently perpetuating harm, and to avoid creating more negative experience for people for whom racism is a daily lived reality" (*Nature* 2023).

*Science* and its related member organization, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), have published several reflections on the history of the organization, beginning with a 2021 editorial that I was fortunate to author alongside the CEO of AAAS and the editor-in-chief of *Science* (Slattery, Parikh, and Thorp 2021). *Science* has followed this work with several issues devoted to scientific racism, and AAAS has begun several institutional projects related to issues of racism in science, including an annual DEI report (AAAS 2023).

Since the initial swell of support for such statements, public support has waned, especially in the last two years, with anything tagged "DEI," "anti-racism," or "critical race theory" becoming objects of political and public debate (Kalita 2023; Wallace-Wells 2021). Books, campus initiatives, and even school names have been relitigated, with some rolling back or challenging measures put in place in 2020. Exemplifying this trend, a school board in Virginia voted in May 2024 to restore the names of two schools to honor Confederate generals, years after those names were successfully stripped from the schools (*The Northern Virginia Daily* 2024). Furthermore, several states have passed laws banning diversity initiatives at state colleges, with Florida, for example, restricting even "how educators could discuss discrimination in mandatory courses" (Betts 2024).

Despite this pushback, the task of historical reconsideration remains a moral imperative to expel the demons of the past and face more clearly the present and the future. For academic fields, such as those broadly governed by journals like *Zygon*, I find three steps necessary for a successful reconsideration: acknowledging the past, uncovering the depths of the historical challenges, and allowing that which is uncovered to alter the future. The work done by *Nature* and *Science*, for example, remains only in the first step. The work of the APA,

ASHG, and UCL signify a valiant attempt at the second step, and the future will determine if they complete the third.

## Reconsidering the History of Science and Religion

In the interdisciplinary field of science and religion studies, little has been done at an institutional level in any of the three steps of historical reconsideration.<sup>2</sup> Many individuals, colleges, journals, and related organizations have done excellent work in the contemporary intersections of racism, bias, science, and religion,<sup>3</sup> but only a few have begun to encounter seriously the lineage of eugenics and racism in the historical development of the field.<sup>4</sup> Fewer still have dealt directly with the elision of eugenics in the science–religion conversations in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

In the historiography of intersections of scientific and theological philosophies, the body of literature seems to skip eugenics when considering the twentieth century. Courses and books on the intersections of Christianity and science, for example, traditionally begin with ancient Greece, then move to Galileo, Darwin, and the Draper-White hypotheses of the late nineteenth century. Such discussions then follow the evolution dialogues, coming into the slow acceptance (or lack thereof) of evolutionary theory by various Christian communities in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in the 1950s, the modern field of “science and religion” emerges with Ian Barbour and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, whose masterful works laid the groundwork for at least the first half-century of science–religion scholarship.

My own contribution to this discussion has been to investigate the role of racism and eugenics in the works of Teilhard de Chardin. I argued in 2017 and 2024 that Teilhard de Chardin’s corpus is suffused with a paternalist racism, best seen in his anthropological treatises and his discussion of human evolution (Slattery 2024; cf. Slattery 2017). This racism treats all humans beyond those of Western European descent as inherently inferior: those of Asian and African heritage slightly inferior, while indigenous peoples he names very inferior, “fixed pinnacles of their own weaker and imperfect evolutionary lines” (Slattery 2024, 12). These arguments contributed to his adoption of explicit eugenic philosophies beginning the late 1930s and continuing until his death. His eugenic and racist commitments did not affect every aspect of every essay, but they are significant in their impact and, most importantly, previously went largely unnoticed or ignored in scholarship (Slattery 2024, 33–38).

One of the more compelling facts about Teilhard de Chardin’s case is his passion for eugenics through the early 1950s, when he became frustrated by the duplicitous renaming of institutions and the hesitancy of people to conduct eugenic experiments after the war (Slattery 2024, 32). Teilhard de Chardin was a very consistent thinker. Since he decided to follow eugenic ideas in the late 1930s, he named this public disapprobation for everyday eugenics in the 1950s

as hypocrisy, decrying the political motives that dominated the conversation. While there were plenty of critical discussions of eugenics in the 1950s, the criticisms were limited to those affiliated with the horrors perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazi party. All other eugenics discussions—like the ones connected to Teilhard de Chardin—were quietly elided and considered closed.

Thus, there was no justice demanded regarding the Americans whose work influenced Hitler, like Madison Grant, nor of the American eugenic laws that laid the groundwork for the Nazi eugenic laws, like those in Virginia (see, for example, Lombardo 2022; Offit 2017). The postwar righteous anger was employed to catch Nazis, hold trials, and erase all mentions of eugenics in public policy and private conversations. Unless eugenicists were directly tied to the Nazi regime, they saw little consequences. Because of this, much of American eugenics was simply renamed, and many eugenicists continued to work under different pretenses. Over the next half century, these eugenicists thrived in their research, exemplified by protests against UNESCO's famous racial equality statements, fears of global overpopulation, and the misogyny and racism found in many scientific circles.<sup>7</sup>

The reality of the science–religion historiography of this era is that so much ink has been spilled over evolution and theology, attempting to correct or understand creationists, that perhaps we have developed a blind spot when it comes to uncovering and correcting our own errors of the past. While I disagree with the scientific denialism of creationists, perhaps such views were entrenched by the merging of evolution and eugenics and faith, and perhaps such views were further entrenched by the denial that eugenics was supported by the same people who supported evolution. It is time to set the record straight and recover the darker history of the intersections between science and religion, and it is time that this work be done by those who research intersections of science and religion more broadly.

### **A Collective Response as a Beginning**

While I began by referencing the work of the APA, ASHG, and UCL, I believe that such collective, sustained actions are now highly unlikely given the shift in political climate and the expense required. Yet significant steps can still be taken without such succinctly organized actions, including the tasks of uncovering the past and researching the contemporary legacy of past harms. For the broad field of science and religion studies, it is precisely this type of collective work I am proposing, highlighted by an in-person workshop in the fall of 2025 and a thematic section of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* in 2026 that will focus on essays addressing reconsiderations of the history of the science–religion discussion, especially the role of eugenics in the past and present of the conversation. This thematic section will be co-edited by myself, Myrna Perez, and Charles McCrary.

I propose this workshop and thematic section both as a gathering of important work from seasoned authors and as a way for the international community of scholars who read *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* to begin to work together towards a collective reconsideration of the origins of the modern discussions of the intersections of science, philosophy, religion, and theology. It is my hope that this work will be the next step in the process of reconsidering the past and, with clarity of thought, reconsidering the future.

For the thematic section of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, all essays will be considered, but I am especially interested in essays that discuss one of the following:

- eugenics in theological works in the early twentieth century
- eugenics in the evolution/creation debate in the early twentieth century
- eugenics in the emergence of theological consideration of genetics
- the impact of eugenics on fundamentalism and creationism in the twentieth century
- renewed historical considerations of figures, events, and discussions during the eugenic period
- the impact of race and racism in the development of the modern field of science and religion
- the changing definitions of religion in the early twentieth century as related to science
- eugenics as a form of governance in relation to secularism and religion
- eugenics as a science/religion framework that influenced colonial policies in the Americas, Africa, and Asia in the early twentieth century

In order to be considered for the workshop and thematic section, please send a 1,000-word abstract to [slatteryj@duq.edu](mailto:slatteryj@duq.edu) by January 31, 2025. Please direct all questions to the same email address.

**John P. Slattery**

Executive Director, Carl G. Grefenstette Center for Ethics in Science,  
Technology, and Law, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

[slatteryj@duq.edu](mailto:slatteryj@duq.edu)

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The last update to this seems to be December 2022, at which time they shifted their recent work to a section focused on further equity, diversity, and inclusion actions, conferences, and grants. See APA (2023).
- <sup>2</sup> In this case, by “institutions” I mean university centers, professional organizations, nonprofits, or journals specifically devoted to the broadly construed field of science, religion, and technology studies.
- <sup>3</sup> In *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, for example, see Jack Mulder (2021) as well as the March 2019 edition (*Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 54 (1)), which included both a study of racism in artificial intelligence and an extended book symposium on Terence Keel’s 2018 *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial*. Outside this journal, excellent examples abound, such as Daniel Bolger et al. (2024) and *Science as Mastery: A Story about Race and Power*, directed by Nathan Clarke (wwwAAASorg 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> These books include Keel (2018), Sharon Mara Leon (2013), Alexander Pavuk (2021), Christine Rosen 2004), Perez Sheldon, Ragab, and Keel (2023).
- <sup>5</sup> Again, the works listed in the previous note have somewhat ameliorated this elision, most recently essays in *Critical Approaches* (Perez Sheldon, Ragab, and Keel 2023) by Myrna Sheldon, Joseph Graves, and Cassie Adcock.
- <sup>6</sup> My own books are as guilty of this elision as any other, discussing evolution in the 1890s and early 1900s without mentioning the rise of eugenic discussions and the impact of early eugenic considerations on evolutionary theories. See Slattery (2019, 2021) and Perez Sheldon, Ragab, and Keel (2023).
- <sup>7</sup> For histories of the legacies of eugenicists and related persons in the mid-to-late twentieth century, see Alison Bashford (2022), Joseph L. Graves (2003), Adam Rutherford (2023), Angela Saini (2019), and William H. Tucker (2002).

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