

UNITARIANS AND EUGENICS:  
THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST?

The arrogance became manifest in 1630 on the decks of the *Arbella* with John Winthrop's "city on a hill" proclamation. God had chosen the Puritan people to create a model society, an example and a beacon to guide the corrupt old world. This conviction of being superior to all others persisted over centuries, long after many of the Puritans had become Unitarians. When Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing asserted humanity's "likeness to God", it was clear that many of his followers were convinced that their likeness was greater than that of most other mortals.

Early Nineteenth Century Unitarians were aware of the multitude of social problems being experienced by the poor, and especially by recent immigrants. Their real commitment to social reform was based on the unspoken premise that it was others who needed the benefits of social reform; certainly not themselves. Noblesse oblige was a fruit of the assumption that the existing class system was a result of the natural order of things, but it would be good if some benefits would trickle down to those who were less fortunate than themselves.

Who were they? "This is good old Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk only to the Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to God." This paen was created by Oliver Wendell Holmes in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1860's. He was also responsible for the term Boston Brahmin. Wikipedia describes it, "The term effectively underscores the strong conviction of the New England gentry that they were a people set apart by destiny to guide the American experiment as their ancestors had played a leading role in founding it. The term also illustrates the erudite and exclusive nature of the New England gentry. ... The Winthrops, Dudleys, Saltonstalls, Winslow, and Lymans (descended from English magistrates, gentry and aristocracy) were, by and large, happy with this arrangement. All of Boston's 'Brahmin elite' maintained the received culture of the old English gentry, including cultivating the personal excellence that they imagined maintained the distinction between gentlemen and freemen, and between ladies and women. They saw it as their responsibility to represent what they defined as high standards or excellence, duty and restraint. Cultivated, urbane, and dignified, a Boston Brahmin was to be the very essence of enlightened aristocracy. The ideal Brahmin was not only wealthy, but displayed what was considered suitable personal virtues and character traits."

WHILE NEVER WERE ALL UNITARIANS BRAHMINS, THIS ETHOS DOMINATED THE AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION WELL INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

Among the personal virtues was philanthropy. The Brahmins were not oblivious to the deteriorating conditions of the poor. Led by their ministers, several urban Boston churches banded together to find means of preaching the gospel to the poor through philanthropy,

education, worship, and free church privileges. By 1834 these impulses led to the organization of the Benevolent Fraternity of Unitarian Churches. Rev. Joseph Tuckerman was chosen to be its Minister at Large. He had been a Harvard College roommate of Channing, and had served a congregation in Chelsea for many years. The congregations and minister who supported him had a very jaundiced view of those whom they hired Tuckerman to help; their poverty was assumed to the result of sin, dissipation and other vices. Help them, but certainly do not welcome them into our congregations. Tuckerman, acknowledged to be the “father of American social work”, had a genuinely compassionate nature. He visited the poor in their homes, and devised a variety of programs to help them. Eventually ‘Ben Frat’ had chapels with a variety of programs for children and adults, even having summer camps for the children. Underneath all this philanthropic activity was the assumption that this Christian charity should be a voluntary and private endeavor; there was no place for government intervention.

Theodore Parker was perceived to be among the most radical Unitarian ministers. He was an outspoken proponent of the abolition of slavery. He welcomed immigrants. But never did he believe that these ‘others’ were equal to Anglo Saxons. While he grew in humble circumstances, his lineage was distinguished. His grandfather, John Parker, had commanded the rebel troops in the battle of Lexington which lit the shot heard around the world. As a young man he struggled, but eventually graduated from Harvard. As a minister he soon attracted a large following, gained a national reputation, and became a leader in ‘progressive’ causes. Later, he did manage to get money. He did it in a traditional clerical manner; he married it. His wife was a Cabot.

In an excellent UUHS Journal article, Jim Kelley point out that Parker was not a hateful racist, but, nevertheless was a “racialist”. Like other ‘racialists, Parker believed that people’s capabilities were formed by their racial attributes. Since he considered his Anglo-Saxon tribe to be the most advanced of all the races, this conviction allowed him to put Anglo-Saxons in the forefront of human progress. While he was generally receptive to the new influx of immigrants, he has some strong thoughts about particular groups. Kelley quotes some of his views in “Some Thoughts on the charities of Boston”, he wrote that (1) Anglo-Saxon pauperism is easily disposed of. German pauperism - recent immigrants) will give us little trouble. (3.) Jewish pauperism will take care of itself...and will be taken charge of by Jewish Almsgiving. ...There was no need to worry about Negro poverty since they could get by with less. But then he came to the Irish. “Celtic Pauperism was “our Stone of Stumbling”. “the Irishman has three bad things – bad habits, bad religion, and worst of all a bad nature.” “In dealing with the Irish poor, I lay down three maxims... (1) The Irishman will always lie if it is for his momentary interest. (2.) He will not work while he can exist by begging. (3.) He will steal when he can get a chance. ... I might add a 4<sup>th</sup> - Paddy will get drunk if he can find liquor.” In spite of these harsh opinions, in an 1854 speech, and in spite of his pride in his Anglo Saxon heritage, he characterized his people as the “most aggressive, invasive, and exclusive people on the Earth.” It might be good for humanity if there was more racial mixing.

One of the primary purposes of the American Unitarian Association, organized in 1825, was to spread the faith by planting new congregations. For much of its history the target was larger cities and academic communities where we would find 'our kind of people'. Ministers were sent and loans made for building churches. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, insisted that there were potential Unitarians in small towns and farming communities. He urged that efforts be made by the AUA to organize in those places. Little response. Jones himself travelled widely in his region and succeeded in organizing several new congregations in smaller communities. Denominational Unitarian extension efforts continued in the same manner up to at least the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Look in college towns and affluent suburbs for "our kind of people".

Eugenics and the Unitarians is a primary subject of this paper. However, eugenics did not create elitism and racism among the Unitarians. This movement worked to create an aura of "scientific" respectability for prejudices which had existed among the Puritan and Unitarian elites for centuries. Eugenics as a "science" was first advocated in the 1880's by Sir Francis Galton, a respected English scientist and a cousin of Charles Darwin. He was convinced that genetic characteristics were racially determined and that some races were inherently superior to others. Not surprisingly, he was certain that the Anglo-Saxon/Nordic race was superior to all others. Superior races should be encouraged to produce more children; inferior ones should be contained and even eliminated. "What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly." One method would be the forcible sterilization of the "unfit" (the poor, the disabled and the 'immoral'), and perhaps even their extermination.

The most important American public advocate of eugenics was David Starr Jordan, a distinguished scientist and President of Stanford University. Born into a Universalist family in Indiana, his mother gave him the middle name of Starr because she was a great admirer of Thomas Starr King. While he never joined a church, he quickly became a favorite of the Unitarians. The American Unitarian Association published his *The Blood of the Nations* in 1906. It went through four printings. Races could be defined and ranked. Anglo Saxons were, not surprisingly, at the top. Indeed, "All the old families of New England and Virginia trace their lines back to nobility and thence to royalty. Almost every Anglo Saxon has, if he knew it, has noble and royal blood in his veins"

Contrast this with the dissipation of continental races, and especially the French. "In what consist the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon?" "When we consider with Demolins. "what consists the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon,' we shall find his descent from the old nobility – Saxon, Norman and Dane,' not the least of the factors."

France is a nation of decadents, "a condition due to the inherited strain of an overwrought civilization. All of noble blood were continuously noble. All belonged to the leisure class. All were held on the backs of men of a third estate, men of weaker heredity, beaten lower into the dust by the weight of an ever-increasing body of nobility. The blood of the strong rarely mixed

with of the clown.” With this pattern, the word ‘degenerate’ is found adequate to explain all the eccentricities of French literature, art, politics, or jurisprudence.’. Go there to Paris and find ‘on their boulevards a mob of crazy painters, maudlin musicians, drunken poets and sensation mongers...”

Jordan was an ardent pacifist. Not because he greatly valued peace, but because he believed that nations sent their best and brightest off to war, where many of them were slaughtered. Back home inferior people would take their place. Hence his contempt for the French; they had lost their best and brightest in the Franco- Prussian War.

Jordan found an appreciative audience among the Unitarians. The Association and its Beacon Press, under the leadership of Charles Livingston Stebbins, published 19 of his books between 1902 and 1913, more than by any other author. Some of them were still in print in the 1930’s. He was a popular speaker at Unitarian gatherings.

Leading Unitarians were at the forefront to the eugenics movement. Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard was an enthusiastic advocate. He had long been an advocate of preventing the mixing of races. This, for him, meant “included Irish Catholic marrying white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Jews marrying Gentiles, and blacks marrying whites.” (Cohen, Adam S. Harvard Magazine, March, 2018). He was active in the movement. He was the President of the New England Eugenics Society. Along with David Starr Jordan, he was a Vice-President of the first International Eugenics Conference in London in 1912. He was joined on the American Consultative Committee by Unitarian sympathizer Alexander Graham Bell. Previously he was an outspoken supporter of laws to sterilize people deemed to be “feebleminded”. In 1907 Indiana passed the first law encouraging forced sterilization. Eliot enthusiastically endorsed the law which he said, “blazed the trail which all free states must follow, if they would protect themselves from moral degeneracy.”

Abbott Lawrence Lowell, Eliot’s successor as Harvard president, was equally elitist in his views about “inferior” races. An active supporter of eugenics, he created a quota on the number of Jewish students admitted, and he made sure that the small number of Black students were not allowed to live in the Harvard Yard.

Eugenics attracted the approval of some prominent Negro leaders including W. E. B. Dubois and Mary McLeod Bethune. They believed that large families were pushing Negroes into deeper poverty. But they also believed that there was a Negro elite which was just as able as the White elite, and deserved comparable recognition and status.

Eugenics was closely connected with older attitudes about immigration. By the end of the Nineteenth Century most new immigrants were arriving from Eastern and Southern Europe. By eugenics standards, they were clearly inferior people. Concerns about the immigration of inferiors had been around since the beginning of the republic. The Know Nothing movement of

the mid- Nineteenth Century was vehemently anti-Immigration. The biggest threat, according to this group, was Roman Catholics. The party did not achieve great political success, but the prejudice persisted. The next major attempt to keep out “undesirables” came with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The impetus came from California where most of the Chinese resided. There was almost unanimous support for the act in the United States Senate. But there was one major exception.

Senator George Hoar, a Unitarian and a Republican from Concord, Massachusetts, objected. He noted that the number of Chinese in California was 105,000 in a population of 50 million. The problem was not that they would take away too many jobs from “white” workers, but simple race prejudice. “What argument can be urged against the Chinese that has not been heard against the negro in living memory. The negroes were savages, heathens, wild beasts... The great political parties vied with each other in pandering to this prejudice.” He went on to remind his fellow senators, “It is scarcely forty years since the Irishman, who has been such a source of wealth and strength to America, began his exodus across the sea. ... He comes, said the honest bigotry of that day, only to get the means of living, and then to return; her will drive the American to starvation by the competition of his cheap labor; he lives in squalor and filth; he want only a few potatoes for food; he is blindly attached to the Popish religion; he owes his allegiance to a foreign potentate; he is incapable of intelligent citizenship.” The bill was passed almost unanimously.

Of course, the Chinese were in California. What Harvard graduate and Massachusetts Senator Hoar felt about Portuguese and Italian immigrants was clear; they were unfit for citizenship.

Joining Eliot and Lowell in their enthusiasm for eugenics were fellow Unitarians William Howard Taft, Oliver Wendell Holmes (father and son), and clergymen John Haynes Holmes and Charles Francis Potter. Surely there were others. Their motives may have been generous. They wanted to encourage the “best” people to have more children in order to improve the genetic stock of American society. Margaret Sanger founded Planned Parenthood to offer sex education and to provide contraceptives - especially to the poor - to encourage them to limit their family size. What to do about the “unfit” posed a problem. Sterilization was one solution. But unless further action was initiated they would still be living among the general population. Institutions were developed to warehouse the “feeble-minded”. There were no clear criteria for what symptoms could scientifically define “feeble-mindedness”. Most of those so-identified were poor and from some minority group. Those who had power could easily attach the label and have persons sent away to be incarcerated. The Fernald “Hospital” in Belmont, Massachusetts, was created by Dr. Walter Fernald, a committed eugenicist. It was a warehouse for the “feeble-minded”. There was no pretense of trying to provide the support that would allow these people to reenter society.

An epic decision in the crusade to eliminate feeble-mindedness came in 1927. The Commonwealth of Virginia had a eugenics sterilization law. It was challenged in the United

States Supreme Court. A young woman, Carrie Buck, had been labeled as “feeble-minded” by the state, and had been selected for eugenic sterilization. In fact, she was not feeble-minded. She had grown up in poverty, had been raped by a member of her foster family, and had become pregnant. Because she was pregnant out of wedlock, she was labeled feeble-minded. The court, in an 8-1 decision, determined that the Virginia statute was legal. The majority opinion was delivered by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. In it, he went beyond simply affirming the Virginia law. “...he urged the nation to get serious about eugenics and prevent large numbers of ‘unfit’ Americans from reproducing. It was necessary to sterilize people who ‘sap the strength of the state to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. ...Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” In fact, Carrie Buck’s infant daughter was perfectly normal.

It is impossible to discern whether all Unitarians who supported eugenics also supported segregation and sterilization. Some may have simply desired to have the “best” people produce more children to thwart what Harvard’s Lothrop Stoddard proclaimed in his 1920 book: *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*. It had fourteen printings in its first three years.

That a center of the American eugenics movement should be at Harvard should be no surprise; there were fewer stronger bastions of the Anglo Saxon / Nordic elite. It is impossible to know how many of the Harvard enthusiasts were also Unitarians. As for Lothrop Stoddard, Lothrop is an important Brahmin name. He published much, was well known to the Germans, and spent considerable time there, and enthusiastically endorsed the actions of its eugenics court.

The Rockefeller Foundation helped develop and fund eugenics programs in Germany. They relied heavily on information from California. By 1933 that state had forcibly sterilized more people than all the other states combined. A California eugenics leader, C. M. Goethe, visited Germany in 1934. He noted that more than 5000 people a month were being sterilized. He proudly proclaimed to a colleague, “You will be interested to know that your work has played a powerful part in shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler in this epoch-making program.”

Earlier, another ardent eugenics advocate was Madison Grant. He was a distinguished scientist teaching at Columbia. In 1916 he published *The Passing of the Great Race*. The book was widely circulated, and was translated into German. Grant received a fan letter from one Adolph Hitler. Hitler called the book “his Bible”. After he gained power in the early 1930’s, he sent a delegation of 45 lawyers to New York to study American racial laws, the world’s most extensive system. They did extensive research and talked with many authorities. This elaborate structure became a model for Germany’s own new racial laws.

More specifically, Harry H. Laughlin, an American researcher had drafted Model Eugenic Sterilization laws. He claimed that they were the basis for the 1935 Nuremberg racial hygiene laws. That this claim is justified is confirmed by the fact that in 1936 he was invited to the

University of Heidelberg to receive an honorary doctorate for his work on the “science of racial cleansing”.

Elitism has pervaded much of the Unitarian community since the very beginning. There has been an unacknowledged assumption that as a group we were the best and the brightest. Indeed, for many decades the Unitarian Laymen’s League published lists of prominent men who identified as Unitarians. Only recently have we begun to focus on that reality of our elitism... How many has it driven away who were attracted to our movement? Alas, some of the consequences have been pernicious. Did the prejudices of the Unitarian elite help inspire and justify the Holocaust?

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