

# Eugenics and Catholicism in Brazil: a study based on Catholic intellectual production in Rio de Janeiro in the decades of 1920 and 1930<sup>1</sup>

Eugenia e Catolicismo no Brasil: um estudo a partir da produção intelectual católica do Rio de Janeiro nas décadas de 1920 e 1930

Daniel Florence Giesbrecht\*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4142-6860>

## Abstract

The study examines the intricate intersection between eugenics, the Catholic Church, and discursive power. The clash between radical eugenicists and the Church is analyzed, highlighting rhetorical strategies and forms of expression. This raises whether, in the Brazilian context, the Church has played a role in advocating for a model of Catholic eugenics. To explore this issue, bibliographic and documentary sources were analyzed, including Catholic publications in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the book *Ensaios de Biologia*, conceived by the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies, and the magazine *A Ordem*, an influential periodical of the Catholic intellectual elite at that time, associated with the Dom Vital Center. A methodological approach emphasizing hermeneutic and qualitative analysis has been chosen. This choice aimed to explore the various perspectives and interpretations present in the selected sources. In summary, the research reveals the intricate dynamics of power, discursive control, and the resistance between eugenics and religion, offering insights into a crucial period in the history of the relationship between science and faith.

**Keywords:** Eugenics. Catholic Intellectuals. Catholic Press. Church and Modernity. Brazil.

## Resumo

O estudo investiga a intrincada interseção entre eugenia, Igreja Católica e poder discursivo. Analisa-se o embate entre os eugenistas radicais e a Igreja, evidenciando estratégias retóricas e formas de expressão. Surge, assim, a indagação sobre se, no contexto brasileiro, a Igreja desempenhou o papel de

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\* Researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (CEIS20) and Guest Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts (FLUC), both at the University of Coimbra. PhD student in Contemporary History. Email: [profdanielflorence@gmail.com](mailto:profdanielflorence@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) [Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology] – via the doctoral scholarship – 2021.04805.BD.

defender um modelo de eugenia católica. Para explorar essa questão, foram analisadas fontes bibliográficas e documentais, incluindo publicações católicas no Rio de Janeiro nas décadas de 1920 e 1930, como o livro *Ensaios de Biologia*, concebido pelo Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores, e a revista *A Ordem*, um periódico influente da elite intelectual católica da época, associado ao Centro Dom Vital. Optou-se por uma abordagem metodológica que enfatizasse a análise hermenêutica e qualitativa. Essa escolha teve como objetivo explorar as diversas perspectivas e interpretações presentes nas fontes selecionadas. Em síntese, a pesquisa revela as intrincadas dinâmicas de poder, controle discursivo e resistência entre eugenia e religião, oferecendo percepções sobre um período fundamental na história das relações entre ciência e fé.

**Palavras-Chave:** Eugenia. Intelectuais Católicos. Imprensa Católica. Igreja e Modernidade. Brasil.

## Introduction

Eugenics, envisioned by Francis Galton in the late 19th century, became a sort of self-image of modernity. Attracting enthusiasts worldwide, the “science of Galton,” as it became known, became a central concept in scientific, social, and political debates in both European circles and the Americas. Through methodologies of intervention and control over heredity and the environment, eugenic theories promised to improve the genetic quality of human populations while simultaneously preventing societal degeneration. As a result, certain fields of knowledge related to genetics were privileged, leading to the establishment of the model of negative eugenics, which advocated for the adoption of total biopolitical measures — Such as dissemination of contraceptive methods; marital restrictions when necessary; and sterilization of individuals deemed harmful to collective health and race<sup>2</sup>.

In a more particular context such as Brazil, the implementation of the republican regime at the end of the 19th century reflected a time heavily influenced by the positivism of Auguste Comte and the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. This conducive environment allowed for the incorporation of new projects of social engineering that promised the improvement of the human condition from the perspective of the bourgeois class, aiming to preserve the lineage of the social elites and, simultaneously, regenerate the lower classes through hygienic and moral measures. Thus, theories of a

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<sup>2</sup> STEPAN, Nancy. *The hour of eugenics: race, gender, and nation in Latin America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

racist nature, legitimized by the sciences, aligned with notions of progress and evolution<sup>3</sup>.

As the country progressed towards modernization, the quest for refinement of the racial profile of the population emerged as a central concern to foster national development. Driven by demographic challenges, the complex multiracial structure, and issues in Brazilian healthcare, advocates of eugenics would experience a significant increase in influence during the 1910s<sup>4</sup>.

From this, the concept of Latin eugenics emerges as an approach that reflects European conceptions of human improvement and incorporates distinctive elements of the Latin American reality. The main course of action of the intellectual debate on eugenics in Latin contexts relied on assumptions of national modernization and, consequently, the strengthening of the nation-state<sup>5</sup>.

According to scholar Nancy Stepan's analysis, this framework has provided a viable platform for the development of a form of preventive eugenics in Brazil, strongly influenced by French neo-Lamarckism<sup>6</sup>. Such approach to eugenics was not only limited to the selection of favorable hereditary traits but also encompassed the promotion of hygiene, disease prevention, maternal and childcare, improvement of educational and work conditions, mitigation of social problems such as alcoholism and prostitution. Thus, eugenic engineering aimed not only for collective refinement but also for the promotion of economic progress, based on a perspective adapted to the nation's specificities.

These reformist principles were gradually embraced by the Catholic Church in the early decades of the 20th century. Through the advancement of material life and scientific discourse, a convergence between Catholicism and the modern world was observed, especially after the impacts of the French Revolution in 1789 and the increasing secularization of Western

<sup>3</sup> GIESBRECHT, Daniel Florence. "Divus contra Galton: o debate eugênico a partir da produção intelectual católica brasileira na década de 1930" In *Anuario de Antropología Iberoamericana*, pp. 1-6, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> BONFIM, Paulo. *Educar, higienizar e regenerar: uma história da eugenia no Brasil*. Jundiaí: Paco Editorial, 2017, pp. 42-43.

<sup>5</sup> WEBER, Maria Julieta. "Eugenia Latina em Portugal e no Brasil (primeira metade do século XX)" In *Trabalhos de Antropologia e Etnologia*, v. 63, pp. 205-217, 2023, p. 208. To learn more, see TURDA, Marius; GILLETTE, Aaron. *Latin eugenics in comparative perspective*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014; SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. *Renato Kehl e a eugenia no Brasil: ciência, raça e nação no período entreguerras*. Guarapuava: Unicentro, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> STEPAN, op. cit., p. 92.

states<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, the apparent compatibility between neo-Lamarckism and Catholicism, in contrast to Protestant determinism, is pointed out as one of the fundamental reasons for the adherence of most Brazilian Catholic eugenicists to the approach of preventive eugenics<sup>8</sup>. In this tradition, there was an emphasis on the value of human dignity and freedom, as well as the importance of the pursuit of moral and spiritual excellence, in line with the ideal of regeneration proposed by eugenicists. For example, in the 1910s, the British priest Thomas John Gerrard had already expressed in his book *The Church and Eugenics* that the pursuit of eugenic reform should not be hindered by the Church, but rather promoted by it, on a spiritual basis<sup>9</sup>.

However, the apparent reconciliation between eugenic principles and Catholic precepts have proved to be fragile. During the 1920s and 1930s, the practice of eugenic sterilization, both voluntary and compulsory, as well as the adoption of birth control methods, spread mainly in Protestant tradition countries, especially those of Anglo-Saxon origin<sup>10</sup>. Faced with these advancements, a clear and unequivocal concern was demonstrated by the Catholic Church, which condemned all actions that interfered with the natural process of life procreation. The papal encyclical *Casti Connubii*, promulgated on December 31st, 1930, by Pope Pius XI, played a significant role in reaffirming the Church's uncompromising stance regarding birth control, abortion, and sterilization as affronts to the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith<sup>11</sup>.

Given the proliferation of biopolitical notions of invasive interventions, it is possible to observe that the strategy of expanding the influence of the Catholic Church was intensified out of concern of being marginalized in light of the new values promoted by modern biology. As pointed out by Sérgio Miceli, this process was mainly developed through the establishment of a

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<sup>7</sup> RIBEIRO, Emanuela Sousa. *Modernidade no Brasil, Igreja Católica, Identidade Nacional: práticas e estratégias intelectuais (1889-1930)*. Tese (Doutorado em História)—Recife: Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> TURDA; GILLETTE, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> WEGNER, Robert; SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. "Eugenia 'negativa', psiquiatria e catolicismo: embates em torno da esterilização eugênica no Brasil" In *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, v. 20, pp. 263-288, 2013, p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> The implementation of the first compulsory sterilization law occurred in the United States, specifically in the state of Indiana, in 1907. However, it was in California that the program reached the highest number of cases, with an estimated twenty thousand sterilizations performed between 1909 and 1979. These policies received widespread criticism and scrutiny, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when issues related to individual rights and social justice gained greater prominence. See REILLY, Philip. *The surgical solution: a history of involuntary sterilization in the United States*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> WEGNER; SOUZA, op. cit., p. 273.

series of organizations independent of the ecclesiastical hierarchy<sup>12</sup>. Under the leadership of Catholic intellectuals, these institutions sought to react against intellectual currents, religious beliefs, and political measures contrary to the principles of the Holy See, such as radical eugenic practices, now formally condemned in the pages of the encyclical *Casti Connubii*<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the question arises whether, in Brazil, the Church committed itself to defending a paradigm of Catholic eugenics as an alternative to the principles espoused by negative eugenics, aiming to preserve its influence over the bodies and sexuality of the faithful<sup>14</sup>. This article aims to reflect on this issue.

To achieve this purpose, bibliographical and documentary sources have been analyzed, including Catholic publications in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s and 1930s, with emphasis on the book *Ensaio de Biologia* [Essays of Biology], conceived by the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies, and the magazine *A Ordem* [The Order], a relevant periodical printed by the Brazilian Catholic intellectual elite of that time and also linked to the Dom Vital Center, a recognized association of Catholic intellectuals.

In general, a methodological approach emphasizing hermeneutic and qualitative analysis has been chosen. This choice aimed to explore the various perspectives and interpretations present in the selected sources. To compare and analyze the narratives, discourses and concepts present in these sources, efforts were made to investigate the complex relationships between power, religion, and biology in the context of eugenics.

### **From the foundation of the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies to the publication of *Ensaio de Biologia*.**

The implementation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, heavily influenced by French positivist ideas, resulted in the official rupture between the State and the Church, consecrated by Decree No. 119-A, dated January 7th, 1890<sup>15</sup>. This event forced the Church to undergo a process of institutional reorganization

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<sup>12</sup> MICELI, Sérgio. *A elite eclesíastica brasileira: 1890-1930*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> PIO XI. *Carta encíclica Casti Connubii del Papa Pío XI sobre el matrimonio Cristiano*, Roma, 1930, pp. 15-18. ([https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/es/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19301231\\_casti-connubii.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html)), Last consulted 17 June 2023.

<sup>14</sup> This article employs the term “Catholic eugenics” to describe a eugenic approach grounded in the principles and values of Catholicism. This perspective entails preventive, sanitary, and pro-natalist strategies in line with the guidelines and positions established by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

<sup>15</sup> BRASIL. *Decreto No 119-A, de 7 de janeiro de 1890*. ([https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/decreto/1851-1899/d119-a.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto/1851-1899/d119-a.htm)), Last consulted 20 June 2023.

to adapt to the new circumstances. Additionally, essential structural changes occurred in Latin America in the early 20th century. The rise of the working class, the secularization of culture, and the emergence of new interest groups, coupled with the spread of communism and Protestantism, left the Catholic Church in a state of disorientation<sup>16</sup>.

Nevertheless, this new situation created an opportunity for the growing presence of lay religious institutions in various spheres of the social world, especially through the actions of their intellectual elites<sup>17</sup>. In this context, in Brazil, the lawyer Jackson de Figueiredo and the literary critic Alceu Amoroso Lima, known by the pseudonym Tristão de Ataíde, stood out. They played a central role in leading lay activities aligned with the interests of the Church, notably through the Dom Vital Center and the magazine *A Ordem*, its main vehicle for scientific publication<sup>18</sup>.

After the 1930 Revolution, Getúlio Vargas assumed the leadership of a Provisional Government, committing to restructuring the country until new elections could be held. Due to the lack of constitutional legitimacy of this new government, the Catholic Church seized the opportunity to intervene in the political sphere, emphasizing the necessity of the religious element in the State and arguing that secular society had proven incapable of providing a worthy moral framework<sup>19</sup>.

Aware that higher education represented an effective means to promote education based on Catholic ideology, Jesuit priest Leonel Edgard da Silveira Franca collaborated, through his extensive network of contacts, which included Alceu Amoroso Lima, in the founding of the first Catholic higher education institution in Brazil: the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies in Rio de Janeiro, then the Federal Capital of the country<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup>TODARO, Margareth Patrice. *Pastors, prophets and politicians; a study of brazilian church; 1916-45*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

<sup>17</sup>Lay religious institutions are entities or associations belonging to a specific faith, managed and led by lay members, meaning individuals who do not possess clerical ordination, such as priests, pastors, or monks. Such organizations can fulfill various roles within a religious community, including educational, charitable, social, and cultural activities, among others.

<sup>18</sup>VELLOSO, Mônica Pimenta. "A Ordem: uma revista de doutrina política e cultura católica" In *Revista de Ciência Política*, v. 21, n. 3, pp. 117-160, 1978.

<sup>19</sup>GOMES, Edgar da Silva. "A atualização da hierarquia eclesíástica no Brasil: política e poder na relação Estado/Igreja durante a República Velha (1889-1930)" In *Projeto História: Revista do Programa de Estudos Pós-Graduados de História*, v. 37, pp. 295-303, 2008.

<sup>20</sup>See OLIVEIRA, Natália Cristina de; CAMPOS, Névio de; SKALINSKI JÚNIOR, Oriomar. "O modelo católico de ensino superior no Brasil" In *Revista Internacional de Educação Superior*, v. 5, pp. 1-26, 2019.

The solemn ceremony marking the inauguration of the Institute took place on May 24th, 1932, in the conference hall of the School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro. It was presided over by Cardinal D. Sebastião Leme and directed by Alceu Amoroso Lima. The event was attended by the Minister of Education, Francisco Campos, as well as ecclesiastical authorities and prominent representatives of the Brazilian intellectual community of that time<sup>21</sup>.

In his speech, Alceu Amoroso Lima expressed his concerns about the advance of materialistic and agnostic culture propagated by modern thinkers, especially those who maintained the incompatibility between science and religion<sup>22</sup>. By invoking the British philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, he highlighted Whitehead's observation that Catholic intellectuals had faced discouragement in the face of significant scientific transformations over the last three centuries. From Amoroso Lima's perspective, "one of the main causes of the disrepute of modern religious thought is the timidity of our initiatives, the lack of direction in our studies, and the perpetual 'defensive' position we have adopted"<sup>23</sup>.

Alceu Amoroso Lima criticized the materialist propositions of positivism, evolutionism, and monism, reinforcing the need for a theological restoration as the most viable path for Catholicism to truly reclaim the entirety of Brazilian Catholic thought. To this end, he proposed the resumption of the previously severed relations between the natural sciences and the sciences of the spirit, to demonstrate that "philosophical studies are of fundamental necessity to give formative thought of nationality a secure direction and a constructive discipline"<sup>24</sup>.

The proposed restoration advocated the idea that the hierarchy between the sciences of the natural order and the sciences of the supernatural order implied the supremacy of the latter over the former. This subordination would not alter the autonomy and methodology of the natural sciences, but rather

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<sup>21</sup> CORREIO DA MANHÃ. *A solene inauguração do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores*, 25 maio 1932, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> The lecture by Alceu Amoroso Lima was fully reproduced in issue number 28 of the magazine *A Ordem* in June 1932, of which he was the editor-in-chief, along with Perillo Gomes. See ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo). "Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores" In *A Ordem*, v. 7 (Nova Série), n. 28, pp. 415-425, 1932.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417. In Portuguese: "umas das causas principais do desprestígio do pensamento religioso moderno é a timidez das nossas iniciativas, o desgoverno de nossos estudos e a posição de eterna 'defensiva' em que nos colocamos".

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423. In Portuguese: "os estudos filosóficos são de necessidade fundamental, para dar ao pensamento formador da nacionalidade uma orientação segura e uma disciplina construtora".

indicate that the human being cannot be reduced to schemes of thought, as proposed by modern materialism.

This theoretical framework would serve as the foundational basis for the pedagogical philosophy of the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies, evident both in its course offerings and its intellectual productions, such as its first book publication: *Ensaio de Biologia*.

## For a Catholic approach to modernity and science

Mr. Tristão de Ataíde and Mr. Hamilton Nogueira, whose intellectual expression in contemporary Brazil is widely recognized, have just begun publishing a very intriguing series of “Essays of Biology”. It is an honest work of scientific guidance that the two leaders of the Catholic movement in Brazil are developing with the collaboration of their young disciples [...] This initiative, which can greatly benefit our cultural development, is worthy of the highest praise, and the published volume deserves the strongest encouragement<sup>25</sup>.

This is how the Rio de Janeiro daily *O Jornal*, in its edition of November 26th, 1933, reported the release of the book *Ensaio de Biologia*, printed by Livraria Católica in Rio de Janeiro<sup>26</sup>. The work was supervised by Tristão de Ataíde (Alceu Amoroso Lima) and by the physician Hamilton de Lacerda Nogueira, two renowned Catholic intellectuals associated with both the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies and the Dom Vital Center<sup>27</sup>.

The responsibility for drafting the introduction of the work fell to Tristão de Ataíde. According to his words, throughout the 186 pages, *Ensaio de Biologia*

<sup>25</sup> O JORNAL. “Sem título”, 26 novembro 1933, p. 7. In Portuguese: “Os srs. Tristão de Ataíde e Hamilton Nogueira, cuja expressão intelectual na atualidade brasileira todos reconhecem, acabam de iniciar a publicação de uma série curiosíssima de ‘Ensaio de Biologia’. Trata-se de um honesto trabalho de orientação científica, que os dois líderes do movimento católico no Brasil estão elaborando com a colaboração de seus jovens discípulos [...] A iniciativa, que bons serviços poderão prestar a nossa formação cultural, é digna de mais viva simpatia, e o volume publicado merece os melhores estímulos”.

<sup>26</sup> The intellectual recognition and acceptance of the work extend beyond the borders of the daily press. For instance, the artistic-literary journal *Boletim de Ariel*, which boasted contributions from important collaborators such as Afrânio Peixoto, Arthur Ramos, Evaristo de Moraes, Gilberto Freyre, and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, dedicated a favorable review to it. The reviewer, João de Barros Barreto Filho, described *Ensaio de Biologia* as a thorough work that opposed the exaggerations of hasty pseudoscience, heavily influenced by agnostic materialism. BARRETO FILHO, João de Barros. “Tristão de Ataíde e Hamilton Nogueira – Ensaio de Biologia – Livraria Católica – Rio, 1933” In *Boletim de Ariel*, Ano 3, novembro, 1933.

<sup>27</sup> ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo); NOGUEIRA, Hamilton (Eds.). *Ensaio de Biologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Católica (Publicações do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores), 1933.



promised to offer readers the opportunity to become acquainted with a “new chapter in the history of our thought”. This would imply demonstrating that, in addition to the close relationships “established between speculative problems and practical problems”, it was necessary to understand the “absence of any incompatibility between religion and science”, contrary to the “anachronistic and tired voices” echoed by modern Biology, which, under a deterministic and positivist approach, had become a dominant doctrine, arrogating itself the power to govern the social and moral sciences by “appropriating the concept of life in its totality”<sup>28</sup>. This analysis ends up justifying the selection of the title *Ensaios de Biologia* for the book, since, according to the author himself, Biology, like other sciences, would have limitations and, by surpassing the boundaries of pedagogical, sociological, or moral interpretations, transcends the narrow scope of arbitrariness and imagination<sup>29</sup>.

*Ensaios de Biologia* openly proclaims its doctrinal nature and its mission to “guide upright will”<sup>30</sup>. In this sense, the focus on issues such as sexuality, heredity, motherhood, and procreation is confirmed as central aspects that demand careful reflection and approach regarding the principles upheld by Catholicism. The purpose of the work was to investigate these subjects to provide guidance and directives that align with Christian values, in opposition to the determinist scientific materialism manifested by the extremes advocated by some eugenicists. In other words, eugenics (as a theoretical and practical science aimed at promoting the progress of the species without exceeding the methods considered licit and honest by the Church) could be considered. In spite of that, if under the label of eugenics and eugenism there were hidden flawed or perverse doctrines that confronted the designs of the Holy See, then they should be condemned and combated<sup>31</sup>.

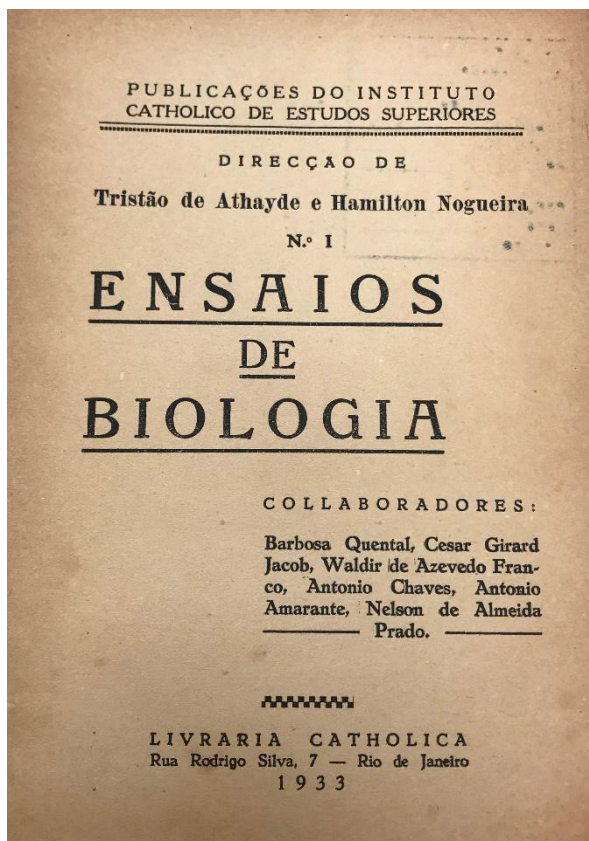
<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-12. In Portuguese: “capítulo novo na história do nosso pensamento”; “estabelecidas entre os problemas especulativos e os problemas práticos”; “ausência de qualquer incompatibilidade entre religião e ciência”; “vozes anacrônicas e cansadas”; “apropriar do conceito de vida em sua totalidade”.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the introductory text written by Tristão de Ataíde, eight other articles were included: *Limites da eugenia* [Limits of Eugenics], also by Ataíde; *Esterilização dos tarados* [Sterilization of the Preverts], by Hamilton Nogueira; *A esterilidade voluntária e sua patologia* [Voluntary Sterility and Its Pathology], by Barbosa Quental; *Crítica geral ao lamarckismo* [General Critique of Lamarckism], by César Girard Jacob; *Biotipologia e suas complicações médico-sociais* [Biotypology and its Medical-Social Complications], by Petrônio Rodrigues Chaves; *Aspecto médico do birth-control* [The Medical Aspect of Birth Control], by Antônio Amarante and, again, by César Girard Jacob; *Eutanásia e Biologia* [Euthanasia and Biology], by Waldyr de Azevedo Franco; and *Energética em Biologia* [Energetics in Biology], by Nelson de Almeida Prado.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 13. In Portuguese: “guiar as vontades retas”.

<sup>31</sup> The appreciation of the relevance of preventive eugenics had already been expressed by Pius XI himself. This consideration is fundamental for understanding how certain eugenic ideas with an environmentalist orientation were absorbed by confessing Catholic intellectuals, who incorporated them into a variant of

**Figure 1:** Title page of the book *Ensaaios de Biologia*, published by Editora Livraria Católica in 1933



**Source:** Author's personal collection.

## Eugenics as Deified Theology

In addition to writing the introduction, Tristão de Ataíde authored the first chapter of *Ensaaios de Biologia*, titled *Limites da Eugenia* [Limits of Eugenics], which begins with a provocative epigraph attributed to the Irish playwright

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Catholic eugenics of a social nature. This includes initiatives aimed at addressing diseases, alcoholism, and prostitution, as well as the implementation of social protection measures. See ACTA APOSTOLICAE SEDIS. *Commentarium Officiale. Anno XXII - Volumen XXII*. Roma: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1930, p. 564.

and avowed eugenicist Bernard Shaw: “What can be done with a wolf can be done with a man”<sup>32</sup>.

As expressed by Ataíde, statements like Shaw’s illustrate the notion that, throughout history, humanity has shown an inclination towards “anthropolatry”, a tendency towards worship—modern man has chosen to venerate, respectively, science and humanity itself.

This phenomenon intensified in the 19th century, driven by evolutionary principles, especially Darwinism, resulting in the formulation of a materialistic philosophy that incessantly sought its own model of “Superman”<sup>33</sup>. Ataíde criticized proponents of racial improvement, who saw the methods proposed by eugenicists as the only viable solution for the regeneration of society: “Super-humanism is the philosophical form of eugenics. And the essence of eugenics lies precisely in this equation of man to animal in their origin and the progressive separation of both in their ends through sexual selection”<sup>34</sup>.

Supported by the findings of the German psychiatrist Iwan Bloch, Tristão de Ataíde argued that Charles Darwin was responsible for laying the ontological foundations that would guide the modern eugenics movement<sup>35</sup>. Such influence would be consolidated by equating humans with animals and advocating for selective criteria that considered the future qualities of offspring resulting from rationalized marital planning. According to him, this phenomenon represented one of the greatest paradoxes of modernity: science, by rejecting any divine manifestation, paradoxically elevated humans

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<sup>32</sup> ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo). “Limites da eugenia” In ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo); NOGUEIRA, Hamilton (Eds.). *Ensaio de Biologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Católica (Publicações do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores), pp. 15-35, 1933, p. 17. Sometime later, in 1939, Tristão de Ataíde, already acclaimed as a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters since 1935, collaborated with Jacques de Lacreteille and Daniel Rops, both distinguished members of the French Academy, in organizing the book titled *O problema sexual* [The Sexual Problem]. In this work, Ataíde, making slight modifications, republished the fundamental text of *Limites da eugenia*, but under the new title *Será aceitável o eugenismo?* [Is Eugenism Acceptable?]. LACRETELLE, Jacques de; ATAÍDE, Tristão de; ROPS, Daniel (Eds.). *O problema sexual*. Tradução: Frederico De Carvalho. Porto: Livraria Tavares Martins, 1963 [1939].

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. Like other Catholic intellectuals of his time, Tristão de Ataíde was influenced by significant ultramontane conservative thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre, Donoso Cortés, and Charles Maurras. These intellectuals identified the materialist philosophy that emerged in the 19th century, represented primarily by the works of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, as their main adversary. For them, the pursuit of the “superman” (Übermensch) as the ideal model of humanity proposed by Nietzsche reflected the ontology of modern Western pagan thought.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. In Portuguese: “o super-humanismo é a forma filosófica do eugenismo. E a essência do eugenismo está justamente nessa equiparação do homem ao animal em sua origem e na separação progressiva de ambos, em seus fins, por meio da seleção sexual”.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

to the status of divinity by promoting eugenics, as if it became a kind of deified theology<sup>36</sup>.

In the Brazilian context, according to the author, the first Eugenics Congress, held from June 30th to July 7th, 1929, at the National Academy of Medicine in Rio de Janeiro, was the main event to intensify eugenic propaganda in the country. During the meeting, government officials, medical experts, and foreign visitors debated various eugenic topics such as marriage, education, race, protection of nationality, racial typology, genealogy, immigration, venereal diseases, biometrics, and childcare<sup>37</sup>. Ataíde acknowledged that these themes involved ethical, philosophical, and religious questions that should not be restricted to eugenicists, as many of the event's participants postulated. Nevertheless, he did not direct specific criticisms at any Brazilian eugenicist, unlike his colleague Hamilton Nogueira, as will be seen later on. The main focus was, above all, the critique of the American Protestant eugenic model, as this was presented by Brazilian eugenicists as a magical and even religious solution to mitigate the nation's potential setbacks.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> The titles of the lectures delivered during the 1st Brazilian Congress of Eugenics, as well as their respective authors, were as follows: *A eugenia no Brasil* [Eugenics in Brazil] – Renato Kehl; *Os grandes problemas da Antropologia* [The major issues of Anthropology] – A. Fróes da Fonseca; *O estado atual do problema de hereditariedade* [The current state of the heredity problem] – André Dreyfus; *Biométrica* [Biometrics] – Fernando R. da Silveira; *Educação e eugenia* [Education and Eugenics] – Levi Carneiro; *Nota sobre os tipos antropológicos do Brasil* [Note on the anthropological types of Brazil] – Edgard Roquette-Pinto; *Guiandole sebacee libere della mucosa geniana in varie razze umane* [Guiding the sebaceous glands of the genian mucosa in various human races] – Alfonso Bovero; *Situação do apêndice vermiforme em relação ao ceco em diversas raças humanas* [Situation of the vermiform appendix in relation to the cecum in various human races] – R. Lochi; *Considerações em torno do índice radio-pélvico de Lapiçue e túbico-pélvico de Fróes da Fonseca* [Considerations around the radio-pelvic index of Lapiçue and the tibio-pelvic index of Fróes da Fonseca] – Ermiro Lima; *Estado atual da questão dos grupos hemáticos* [Current state of the issue of blood groups] – Roberto F. Hinricksen; *Da aplasia clavicular* [On clavicular aplasia] – Benjamin Vinelli Baptista; *Genética Vegetal* [Plant Genetics] – A. J. de Sampaio; *Contribuição aos estudos dos psicogramas* [Contribution to the studies of psychograms] – Ubirajara da Rocha e Arnauld Bretas; *Estatística dos tarados no Brasil* [Statistics of mental defectives in Brazil] – Bulhões Carvalho; *Quadros demonstrativos das moléstias observadas no hospital de Juqueri, de 1925 a 1928* [Demonstrative charts of the diseases observed at the Juqueri hospital, from 1925 to 1928] – Antônio Carlos Pacheco e Silva; *Herança psíquica intrauterina* [Intrauterine psychic inheritance] – Waldemar E. Coutts; *A procriação voluntária do sexo de acordo com a época da coabitação* [The voluntary procreation of sex according to the time of cohabitation] – Jorge de Lima; *Consanguinidade* [Consanguinity] – Newton Belleza; *Casamento e eugenia* [Marriage and Eugenics] – Joaquim Moreira da Fonseca; *O dispensário psiquiátrico como elemento de educação eugênica* [The psychiatric dispensary as an element of eugenic education] – Gustavo Riedel; *Da educação física como fator eugênico* [On physical education as an eugenic factor] – Jorge de Moraes; *Fatores de degeneração observadas nas praças da Polícia Militar* [Degeneration factors observed in the squares of the Military Police] – Motta Resende; *A idade e o casamento* [Age and marriage] – Leonídio Ribeiro; *Maternidade consciente* [Conscious motherhood] – Castro Barreto; *O problema da imigração* [The immigration problem] – A. J. de Azevedo Amaral. PRIMEIRO CONGRESSO BRASILEIRO DE EUGENIA. *Actas e trabalhos*. Rio de Janeiro: [s.n.], v. 1, 1929, pp. 5-6.

The author of *Limites da eugenia* emphasized the connection between the negative eugenics model and Protestantism in the United States, pointing out that, in this country, eugenics would be playing the role that Galton had predicted twenty years earlier: becoming a “religion of humanity” through the systematization of sexuality. This fact would be evidenced in studies such as that of the American Protestant eugenicist Edward Wiggam and his advocacy of birth control, as well as in works like that of the English writer and eugenicist Anthony Ludovici, according to Ataíde, a more reactionary version of Bernard Shaw.

Unlike Wiggam, who saw eugenics as the path to the Christianization of humanity, Ludovici thought the opposite: Christianization, by encouraging the multiplication of the incapable, would be a complete denial of eugenics. Hence, the need for a religion based on the worship of the body, which would infiltrate power structures to pave the way for regeneration and, consequently, the emergence of a new man<sup>38</sup>.

Driven primarily by the rejection of negative eugenics, now officially repudiated in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, it was not only Brazilian Catholic intellectuals who denounced American eugenics. The French Jesuit theologian René Brouillard, in an article titled *L'Engénique et l'eugénisme anglo-saxons devant la morale catholique* [Eugenics and Anglo-Saxon Eugenics in the Face of Catholic Morality], published in June, 1931 in the journal *Études de théologie, de philosophie et d'histoire*, already asserted that, especially in the United States and after World War I, eugenic doctrines, not only in the field of medicine but also in jurisprudence, had deeply rooted themselves, gaining numerous followers in research and propaganda associations, in which Protestant pastors themselves were not strangers<sup>39</sup>.

According to Brouillard, for radical eugenicists, the majority of the population, unaware of the laws of heredity, multiply at random, following their instincts. Therefore, believing that the mentally deficient would have a prolific potency over superior beings and consume a large portion of social wealth, it would be necessary to correct this imbalance by preventing them from reproducing, and by directing, for the benefit of individuals considered normal, financial resources intended for asylums, prisons, and hospitals,

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<sup>38</sup> ATAÍDE, op. cit., *Limites da eugenia*, pp. 25-29.

<sup>39</sup> BROUILLARD, René. “L'Engénique et l'eugénisme anglo-saxons devant la morale catholique” In *Études de théologie, de philosophie et d'histoire*, pp. 596-597, 1931, p. 596.

thus violating, in a vile and dishonest manner, the Christian principles of compassion and charity<sup>40</sup>.

In Brazil, Renato Ferraz Kehl, one of the fervent advocates and promoters of eugenics, had already expressed on several occasions his opposition to social welfare policies, based on the idea that the process of natural selection would eliminate the less adaptable individuals. According to this perspective, coordinated initiatives of assistance, health, and social security would contradict the principles of a eugenic nation, prolonging the lives of the less fit and generating additional costs for the state<sup>41</sup>:

If the inexorable law of the struggle for life still prevailed completely, under which the weak succumb and the strong triumph, most of this residue, which arises clandestinely, violating the precepts of good breeding, would be condemned to perish soon in the early stages of the harsh struggle. Unfortunately, this no longer happens, as one can no longer rely on the selection that once constituted an effective sieve against the undesirable elements, which now survive in great numbers to suffer and to burden the useful and productive elements<sup>42</sup>.

In the same vein as Brouillard, Tristão de Ataíde emphasized that certain practices advocated by some eugenicists mirrored the foundations of modern materialistic revolutionary mentality, contrasting with human and Christian spiritual values. Thus, he urged Catholic intellectuals to discern with precision “a very strict distinction between what is useful in it (eugenics) and what is condemnable”<sup>43</sup>.

This is what needs to be obvious in the minds of integral eugenicists. There are many points on which we do not yield and will never yield. And precisely for this reason, we must

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597.

<sup>41</sup> GIESBRECHT, Daniel Florence; MATOS, Patrícia Ferraz de. “A apropriação do discurso médico-antropológico pelo Poder Legislativo brasileiro: a eugenia como utopia regeneradora na constituinte de 1934” In *Revista Poiésis*, v. 16, n. 29, pp. 37–54, 2022, p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> KEHL, Renato Ferraz. *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Francisco Alves, 1933, p. 34. In Portuguese: “Se a lei inexorável da luta pela vida ainda se impusesse, completamente, sob a qual sucumbem os fracos e triunfam os fortes, a maior parte dessa residualha, que vem surgindo clandestinamente, violando os preceitos da boa geração, estaria condenada a perecer logo nos primeiros lances da áspera peleja. Tal, infelizmente não acontece, não mais se podendo contar com a seleção que outrora constituía o crivo eficaz contra os indesejáveis e que agora sobrevivem em grande número para sofrer e para sobrecarregar os elementos úteis e produtivos”.

<sup>43</sup> ATAÍDE, op. cit., *Limites da eugenia*, p. 32. In Portuguese: “uma distinção muito rigorosa entre o que há nela (na eugenia) de aproveitável e o que há de condenável”.

face eugenics within its “limits,” to prevent eugenic overreach that could easily destroy everything that represents for us the essence of our particular freedom<sup>44</sup>.

For us, true eugenics is only achieved in alliance with true reason and true faith. We are not seeking any new religion. Nor will we allow any science or civil power to invade domains that belong to another kind of sciences and another kind of power. We are neither anarchists nor statistes. We do not believe that sexual life is entirely free. But we also do not accept state interference where it should not intervene. For there are realms that only natural law or revealed law, and not positive law, can regulate<sup>45</sup>.

Therefore, it can be inferred that both lay Catholic intellectuals and ecclesiastics were not opposed to eugenics in its entirety, but rather to certain eugenic models that implied specific forms of social engineering interfering with the nature of human reproduction, such as birth control and sterilization. On the other hand, religious leaders endorsed and promoted a eugenic approach of a preventive, sanitary, and pro-natalist nature, as these methods were in line with the positions held by the clergy, in a sort of Catholic eugenics. This stance aligns with the social policy advocated by the Church since the times of *Rerum Novarum*, reflecting the institution’s purported commitment to the protection of human dignity and the promotion of social welfare<sup>46</sup>.

### *Birth-control*

In general, a considerable number of eugenicists in the Anglo-Saxon world, intending to preserve or even strengthen the racial composition

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33. In Portuguese: “Isso é que precisa ficar bem claro na cabeça dos eugenistas integrais. Há muitos pontos em que não cedemos nem cederemos nunca. E por isso mesmo é que devemos encarar a eugenia em seus “limites”, para impedir a extralimitação eugênica que facilmente destruirá tudo o que representa para nós a essência da nossa liberdade particular”.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 33. In Portuguese: “Para nós, a verdadeira eugenia só se faz em aliança com a verdadeira razão e com a verdadeira fé. Nós não andamos a procura de nenhuma nova religião. Nem consentiremos que nenhuma ciência e nenhum poder civil invada domínios que cabem a outro gênero de ciências e a outro gênero de poder. Não somos nem anarquistas nem estatistas. Não julgamos que a vida sexual seja inteiramente livre. Mas também não aceitamos a ingerência do Estado onde ele não tem que intervir. Pois há recantos que só a lei natural ou a lei revelada, e não a lei positiva, podem regulamentar”.

<sup>46</sup> The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is an apostolic letter issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, addressing the conditions of workers and the social issues resulting from the Industrial Revolution. LEÃO XIII. *Carta encíclica Rerum Novarum do sumo pontífice Papa Leão XIII sobre a condição dos operários*, Roma, 1891. (<https://www.puc-campinas.edu.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/NFC-Carta-Enciclica-rerum-novarum.pdf>), Last consulted 1 February 2024.

of their societies, contributed to the formation of a paradigm of negative eugenics.

This model was based on the coordinated implementation of measures aimed at altering the configuration of the family unit: the legal regulation of marriage, prohibiting it for any individual considered officially dysfunctional or inferior, through the requirement of a prenuptial certificate; divorce, to solve marital incompatibilities and eventually address issues of sterility; preventive sterilization, both voluntary and mandatory, for all individuals incapable of reproducing under satisfactory conditions, whether due to the evident inability to produce superior offspring or due to dangerous physical or moral degeneration, as seen in criminals; and finally, the control or rationalization of reproduction, aiming to improve quality over quantity, a practice commonly known as birth control<sup>47</sup>.

According to historian Regina Marques, from a Foucauldian perspective, these guidelines granted greater authority to doctors, assigning them the role of defining what was considered normal or abnormal in relation to sexual practices. This resulted in the conception of sex as a pathological element of humanity, thus fueling the development of a medico-political project aimed at regulating aspects such as marriages, births, and even the survival of individuals<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a clear conflict between radical eugenicists and Catholics, both aiming to secure control over human bodies through the manipulation of sexuality.

Regarding Brazilian Catholic intellectuals, Hamilton Nogueira had already positioned himself against biopolitical interventions aimed at controlling birth rates since the 1920s. In the article *O malthusianismo: um sério problema social que é também brasileiro* [Malthusianism: A Serious Social Problem that is also Brazilian], published in the November 1924 edition of *A Ordem*, he presented a scathing critique of the spread of so-called “neo-Malthusian fads”, which he considered degrading practices and real attacks on the nation. For Nogueira, given Brazil’s vast territorial area and small population, the country should prioritize increasing birth rates to avoid the fragmentation of national identity, rather than implementing population reduction policies promoted by advocates of birth control<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> See PICHOT, André. *La société pure: de Darwin à Hitler*. Paris: Flammarion, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> MARQUES, Vera Regina Beltrão. *A medicalização da raça: médicos, educadores e discurso eugênico*. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 1994, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. “O malthusianismo: um sério problema social que é também brasileiro” In *A Ordem*, v. 4, n. 37, pp. 239–240, 1924, p. 239. In Portuguese: “modismos neomalthusianos”.



Hamilton Nogueira's stance reflected the conflict between the Church and the rising militancy in favor of birth control, especially in the United States at that time. It is noteworthy that the feminist and nurse Margaret Sanger, one of the main advocates of birth control and abortion rights, wrote a controversial article in 1923 titled *Facing the New Year*, which was published in the periodical *Birth Control Review*<sup>50</sup>. In it, Sanger clearly advocated contraceptive methods based on negative eugenic arguments and encouraged prophylactic abortion in low-income families. At a time when the Church was already cautiously monitoring feminism, views similar to Sanger's were considered a serious affront to life and human dignity.

In turn, *Ensaio de Biologia* incorporated two studies conducted by students under the guidance of Hamilton Nogueira at the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies, which addressed demographic regulation policies: *A esterilidade voluntária e sua patologia* [Voluntary Sterility and Its Pathology] by Barbosa Quental, and *Aspecto médico do birth-control* [Medical Aspect of Birth Control] by Antônio Amarante and César Girard Jacob. Both works share similar objectives, aiming to contest the main arguments presented by proponents of birth control<sup>51</sup>.

In the early decades of the 20th century, Brazil showed a significant interest in infant care<sup>52</sup>. Contrary to the notion that reducing birth rates would proportionally decrease infant mortality, disciples of Hamilton Nogueira emphasized the importance of hygiene and maternal and child health care as effective means to promote the health of pregnant women and reduce child mortality.

<sup>50</sup> SANGER, Margaret. "Facing the New Year" In *Birth Control Review*, v. 7, n. 1, pp. 3-4, 1923.

<sup>51</sup> Barbosa Quental focused on critiquing the studies of the Scottish George Drysdale, while Antônio Amarante and César Girard Jacob took on the task of reproving the works of Margaret Sanger. AMARANTE, Antônio; JACOB, César G. "Aspecto médico do birth-control" In ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo); NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. (Eds.). *Ensaio de Biologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Católica (Publicações do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores), pp. 121-147, 1933; QUENTAL, Barbosa. "A esterilidade voluntária e sua patologia" In ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo); NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. (Eds.). *Ensaio de Biologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Católica (Publicações do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores), pp. 67-79, 1933.

<sup>52</sup> The work of the hygienist physician Arthur Moncorvo Filho stood out for advocating the regulation and supervision of activities related to child health, based on medical-scientific knowledge, thus establishing the beginnings of pediatrics in Brazil. See WADSWORTH, James E. "Moncorvo Filho e o problema da infância: modelos institucionais e ideológicos da assistência à infância no Brasil" In *Revista Brasileira de História*, v. 19, n. 37, pp. 103-124, 1999. As Thiago da Costa Lopes and Marcos Chor Maio assert, it is important to emphasize that although the development of pediatrics in Brazil was not entirely influenced by eugenics, significant similarities were observed regarding the terminology and concepts used in both fields, many of which related to racial determinism. LOPES, Thiago da Costa; MAIO, Marcos Chor. "Puericultura, eugenia e interpretações do Brasil na construção do Departamento Nacional da Criança (1940)" In *Tempo*, v. 24, n. 2, pp. 349-368, 2018, p. 350.

In other words, they advocated for combating poverty, adopting comprehensive sanitation policies, protecting children's rights, and providing parental education through prenatal interventions to emerge as fundamental strategies not only to preserve the lives of Brazilian children but also to safeguard the fate of national identity. This alignment with the principles of preventive eugenics underscored the harmonization of Catholic principles with a proactive approach to promote health and well-being, consolidating the strategy of assuming a central role in advocating for these measures.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Amarante and Jacob cited the renowned French obstetrician and neo-Lamarckian eugenicist Adolphe Pinard<sup>53</sup> as one of the leading authorities in the field of international infant care. Moreover, Pinard was recognized for emphasizing the importance of maternity in maintaining the organic balance of the female body:

Pinard is right when he states that maternity is a normal and psychological function of woman; it is the natural termination of her sexual cycle; it is necessary for her health and development. To claim, as the advocates of birth control do, that repeated motherhood, successive pregnancies, constitute in themselves a factor of morbidity is a manifest desire to force reality<sup>54</sup>.

Both Barbosa Quental and Antônio Amarante and César Girard Jacob stood out in questioning the notion that successive births caused harm to women's health, basing their arguments on the advances of asepsis in obstetrics at that time. The analysis revealed a close interconnection between obstetrical issues, the nature of childbirth, and female physiology, suggesting that motherhood should not be considered a pathological condition.

However, according to Amarante and Jacob, even more concerning than issues related to the dangers of pregnancy were the lack of mention by neo-Malthusians of the universally damaging effects of contraceptive methods. Based on the analyses of the Catholic Belgian obstetrician Raoul

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<sup>53</sup> In addition to Pinard, they cited Raoul de Guchteneere, the surgeon Jean-Louis Faure, the French physician Armand Siredey, the Dutch gynecologist Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde, the physician Giuseppe Catani from the Maggiore Hospital in Milan, the French neurologist Joseph Grasset, Hamilton Nogueira, the American nurse Mary Sewall Gardner, the Irish physician and nutritionist Robert McCarrison, and the British surgeon William Arbuthnot Lane.

<sup>54</sup> AMARANTE; JACOB, op. cit., p. 133. In Portuguese: "Pinard tem razão quando afirma que a maternidade é uma função normal e psicológica da mulher; ela é a terminação natural do seu ciclo sexual; é necessária à sua saúde e ao seu desenvolvimento. Pretender, como fazem os apologistas do birth-control, que as maternidades repetidas, as sucessivas gestações, constituam por si sós um fator de morbidade é vontade manifesta de forçar a realidade".

de Guchteneere, the main aspects of a research report conducted in New York and published in 1924 in the *American Review of Obstetrics and Gynecology* were highlighted, casting doubt on the foundations of reproduction control<sup>55</sup>.

In summary, Guchteneere concluded that data from research on exogenous regulation of fecundity were limited, resulting in a favorable classification by mere assumption, while the investigations lacked recognized scientific and moral methods of value. He initially highlighted the absence of a completely safe and effective contraceptive method to date. Moreover, it was observed that contraceptive methods did not achieve effectiveness when applied to poorer families or less privileged socioeconomic classes. Finally, the divergence of medical opinions was evident due to the lack of proper clinical experimentation and the challenge to data published by clinics in New York and London<sup>56</sup>.

By relying on Guchteneere's statements, Amarante and Jacob seemingly adopted the Galilean method as a strategy to counter proponents of birth control<sup>57</sup>. By challenging the effectiveness of contraceptive methods and highlighting the limitations of research on fecundity regulation, the authors indirectly challenged certain scientific narratives, portraying them as conjectures or assumptions. At the same time, they contradicted them, relying on other scientific evidence, now validated by Catholic medical authorities, such as the eminent Belgian obstetrician.

By doing so, they sought to instill doubts in readers about the validity of scientific discoveries related to reproductive control. This approach questioned established scientific conclusions and weakened the dominant medical discourse on contraceptive methods, suggesting that such conclusions could be mere speculations or subjective interpretations of facts.

In the dispute between the Catholic Church and radical eugenicists, the intricate web of discursive mechanisms in operation was revealed<sup>58</sup>. The Church, relying on its norms of truth and legitimacy, aimed to impose its view

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>57</sup> The author of this article adopted as a basis for naming this strategy the famous case of Galileo Galilei, who faced opposition from the Catholic Church for advocating the heliocentric theory. Part of the tactic against the Florentine physicist and astronomer involved questioning whether what he offered was certain and demonstrated knowledge or merely hypothesis(es). Therefore, the most uncomfortable scientific propositions, from the ecclesiastical standpoint, should be treated more as hypotheses and, therefore, disregarded.

<sup>58</sup> FOUCAULT, Michel. *A ordem do discurso: aula inaugural no Collège de France, pronunciada em 2 de dezembro de 1970*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2012.

on sexuality and reproduction, sanctioning discourses that were in line with its precepts and excluding those that challenged its moral authority. On the other hand, eugenicists, backed by the alleged objectivity of science, sought to establish their norms of truth, challenging ecclesiastical authority and seeking to legitimize their conceptions within the scientific realm. This struggle for dominance of discourse transcended the realm of ideas and permeated power structures and social relations, highlighting the mechanisms of power, sanction, exclusion, and internalization that shaped the discourses of the time.

## Eugenic sterilization

Voluntary and compulsory sterilization were highly controversial topics involving radical eugenicists and the Church, as previously mentioned. During the 1920s and 1930s, eugenic sterilization became relevant in various scientific publications as well as in political debates. In response, the Church expressed concern and unequivocally rejected this intervention in the natural course of the life creation process. It is understandable, for example, as observed in the twenty-fourth session of *Casti Connubii*, that there was a severe condemnation of the imposition of sterilization as a punitive measure<sup>59</sup>.

Robert Wegner and Vanderlei Sebastião de Souza indicate that the attraction exerted by the most extreme eugenic ideas, aimed at preventing the procreation of people considered abnormal, found resonance among certain Brazilian eugenicists, mainly from the late twenties onwards. In *Lições de eugenia* [Lessons of Eugenics], a book published in 1929, Renato Kehl highlighted the relevance of sterilization as a fundamental measure of racial prophylaxis, which, according to him, should be recommended for individuals exhibiting criminal, abnormal, unfit behaviors, or showing any other sign of degeneration<sup>60</sup>.

The sympathy and propaganda promoted by Renato Kehl in favor of sterilization were the target of severe and direct criticism from Hamilton Nogueira in *Educação eugênica* [Eugenic Education], an article in issue number 28 of *A Ordem*, in June 1932<sup>61</sup>. The text in question was a reply to the first volume of the bulletin published by the Brazilian Central Commission on Eugenics, an organization inspired by the model of the German Society for Racial Hygiene, founded by Kehl in 1931.

<sup>59</sup> PIO XI, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> WEGNER; SOUZA, op. cit., pp. 268-269.

<sup>61</sup> NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. "Educação eugênica" In *A Ordem*, v. 7, n. 28 (Nova Série), p. 408-411, 1932a.

Nogueira judged that those responsible for the bulletin adopted a simplistic and vulgar perspective regarding the understanding of human life by postulating that all activities carried out by men and women, whether physical, intellectual, moral, or social, were intrinsically linked to the biological laws of heredity in the pursuit of improvement. Furthermore, the presentation of eugenics by Renato Kehl as a universal solution and a pedestal of the religion aimed at the integral regeneration of humanity was considered by Nogueira a direct affront to the clergy and Catholics in general<sup>62</sup>.

Hamilton Nogueira's concerns were not merely occasional. In addition to Kehl's eugenic leadership, other Brazilian eugenicists were also interested in negative eugenic measures and, through various forms of communication such as pamphlets, articles, lectures, and interviews, disseminated these convictions. Octávio Domingues, a geneticist who would later share the direction of the Eugenics Bulletin with Renato Kehl and entomologist Salvador de Toledo Pizza Júnior, wrote an article titled "*Birth-control*", *esterilização e pena de morte* ["Birth-control", Sterilization, and Capital Punishment], which illustrated well the reasons for the concerns of Catholic intellectuals about eugenic propaganda:

The compulsory sterilization of delinquents, mentally disturbed individuals, and those with hereditary diseases—though not compulsory in the latter case—is another defensive measure for society. Through such means, society would see a decrease in the proliferation of the caste of natural-born criminals, the caste of the mentally disturbed, the caste of those who transmit bad heritages and fatal afflictions that people receive from birth and disseminate them into other cradles indefinitely<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 408. The criticisms of the eugenic extremism advocated by Renato Kehl were not limited to Brazilian Catholic intellectuals. The respected intellectual and Jesuit priest from Portugal, Domingos Maurício Gomes dos Santos, known by the pseudonym Riba Leça, expressed his criticisms of Kehl's calls for eugenic sterilization in an article published in the Jesuit magazine *Brotéria* in April 1934. In his text, Riba Leça disapproved of the relevance of a lecture given by Kehl, at the invitation of the renowned anthropologist and eugenicist Antônio Mendes Correia, at the headquarters of the Portuguese Society of Anthropology and Ethnology, in the city of Porto, on October 24, 1932: "Dr. Renato Kehl delivered [...] a lecture on eugenic policy. But, to be frank and without disparagement, we consider it exceedingly unfortunate, both in its tendency, intention, and content". In Portuguese: "O Dr. Renato Kehl pronunciou [...] uma conferência sobre política eugênica. Mas, para sermos francos e sem desprimor, reputamos infelicíssima, pela tendência, pela intenção e pelo conteúdo". LEÇA, Riba (pseudônimo). "Esterilização e eugenismo" In *Brotéria. Revista Contemporânea de Cultura*, v. 13, n. 3, pp. 217-226, 1934, pp. 217-218.

<sup>63</sup> DOMINGUES, Octávio. "Birth Control", Esterilização e Pena de Morte" In *Boletim de Eugenia*, Ano 3. n. 30, 1931, p. 4. In Portuguese: "A esterilização obrigatória para os delinquentes, tarados mentais, com extensão os portadores de males hereditários, mas neste caso sem caráter compulsório - é outra providência de natureza defensiva para a sociedade que, por tal meio, veria diminuir a proliferação da casta dos

In the October 1932 issue of the magazine *A Ordem*, Hamilton Nogueira revisited his criticisms of advocates for sterilization in an article titled *A esterilização dos inaptos* [The Sterilization of the Useless], once again expressing his direct disapproval of Renato Kehl and his followers: “Men and women, even from a eugenic standpoint, are not merely, as Mr. Renato Kehl defines them, ‘hooks for germ cells’, as if we could do without the other attributes that give them primacy among created beings”<sup>64</sup>.

Since the late 1920s, several studies emerged aimed at questioning the convictions about the absolute accuracy of heredity studies promoted by eugenicists adhering to Mendelian theories. An example is the work titled *La blastotoxie qui crée les dégénérescences individuelles est aussi l’origine de l’hérédité morbide* [The blastotoxia which creates individual degenerations is also the origin of morbid heredity], published in 1928 by the Belgian physician Louis Vervaeck, Director-General of the Belgian Criminal Anthropology Service<sup>65</sup>.

Vervaeck argued that diagnosing the likelihood of familial transmission of the most dangerous characteristics of certain groups of patients and anomalies was difficult, if not impossible, due to the complexity of factors, including the uncertainty of human heredity laws, the possibility of latency of dangerous tendencies in direct descendants, and their possible extinction in subsequent generations, influenced by various factors such as living conditions, appropriate therapeutic interventions, and proper education<sup>66</sup>.

Furthermore, the study suggests that when considering cases of individuals classified as unfit due to factors such as toxins or traumas in the embryonic phase, it was notable that the number of hereditary diseases did not present such an alarming figure when compared to healthy individuals, especially when there was a considerable percentage of people with mental disabilities from parents with no history of genetic diseases<sup>67</sup>.

According to Hamilton Nogueira’s perspective, even in the face of reliable evidence, exemplified by Louis Vervaeck, adherents of “Galtonian

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criminosos natos, da casta dos tarados mentais, da casta dos transmissores das más heranças e dos males fatais que o homem recebe do berço, e os dissemina por outros berços indefinidamente”.

<sup>64</sup> NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. “Esterilização dos inaptos” In *A Ordem*, v. 7, n. 32 (Nova Série), pp. 251–258, 1932b, p. 253. In Portuguese: “O homem e a mulher, mesmo do ponto de vista eugênico, não são apenas, como os define o Sr. Renato Kehl, ‘cabides de células germinais’, como se pudéssemos prescindir dos outros atributos que lhes dão o primado entre os seres criados”.

<sup>65</sup> VARVAECK, Louis. “La blastotoxie qui crée les dégénérescences individuelles est aussi l’origine de l’hérédité morbide” In *Beuxelles-Med*, v. 9, pp. 61-70, 1928.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

science” in Brazil showed considerable interest in the institutionalization of sterilization for punitive and racialistic purposes, as already documented in nations like the United States, England, and Switzerland. These adherents were deeply entrenched in the “rigorous determinism of the biological laws of heredity” and, in an attempt to persuade political authorities, proposed that “for the good of society and the human species, the State authorize the application of processes that prevent the undesirable procreation” of individuals deemed deviant<sup>68</sup>.

In *Ensaio de Biologia*, Hamilton Nogueira would present an expanded version, based on the two previously mentioned texts, titled *A esterilização dos tarados* [The sterilization of Preverts]<sup>69</sup>. In the new version of his study, Nogueira reiterated his previous arguments to challenge proponents of sterilization, expanding his criticisms to the eugenics practiced in the United States. The purpose of this stratagem was to highlight, through the American example, the harms resulting from racial interpretations based on polygenic premises<sup>70</sup>.

According to the author, such ideas neglected the biological phenomenon of adaptation inherent in human beings. Nogueira argued that eugenic practice in the United States, primarily aimed at preserving the American race by reducing the birth rate, was contributing to the emergence of extreme nationalism. This nationalism was characterized by the fanaticism of predominant racism, especially in the southern regions of the country, where white supremacists, influenced by negative eugenics, advocated for the compulsory sterilization of Blacks and immigrants, particularly those of Asian origin<sup>71</sup>.

Just like previously observed in the study conducted by Antônio Amarante and César Girard Jacob, Hamilton Nogueira also seemed to adopt the Galilean method, raising uncertainties about the absolute validity of the propositions advocated by American eugenicists. He intended to provoke questioning regarding the infallibility of the postulates presented, especially

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<sup>68</sup> NOGUEIRA, op. cit., A esterilização dos inaptos, p. 253. In Portuguese: “rigoroso determinismo das leis biológicas da hereditariedade”; “para o bem da sociedade e da espécie humana, o Estado autorizasse a aplicação de processos que impedissem a procriação indesejável”.

<sup>69</sup> NOGUEIRA, Hamilton. “A esterilização dos tarados” In ATAÍDE, Tristão de (pseudônimo); NOGUEIRA, Hamilton (Eds.). *Ensaio de Biologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Católica (Publicações do Instituto Católico de Estudos Superiores), pp. 39-66, 1933.

<sup>70</sup> The polygenists based their theory on the conception that humanity had multiple origins, resulting in the vast racial diversity observed at different stages of evolution.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

through the genealogical analyses used by eugenicists, suggesting that such assertions were not incontrovertible truths but rather speculative conjectures, emphasizing, whenever possible, the abuses, and deficiencies observed in places where eugenic sterilization had been previously implemented:

Well, those who devote themselves to these studies (genealogical) know well how much uncertainty, how much unpredictability is observed in the mechanism of heredity. And if this mechanism is already so uncertain in animals, it is even more so in relation to the human person. And it is this very uncertainty that causes certain hygienists and eugenicists to condemn the application of extreme measures such as the one we are considering<sup>72</sup>. According to its public hygiene committee, the New York Academy of Medicine opines that “the question of sterilization of certain types of mental alienates has not made great progress, for two reasons. Firstly, there is a general prevention against sterilization because of the difficulties and possible abuses that inevitably accompany its application; on the other hand, opinions concerning the heredity of mental disturbances are very divergent; there is no agreement on this subject among specialists” [...] Moreover, these abuses have already been verified even in some states of North America, which hastily adopted the opinions of radical eugenicists, and contributed to the repeal, in some of these states, of the laws that supported sterilizing interventions. Thus in New Jersey, in Nevada, in New York, in Colorado, in Ohio<sup>73</sup>.

With the clear intention of strictly endorsing social interventions of environmental and educational nature, Hamilton Nogueira’s work, as well as the other texts in *Ensaio de Biologia*, aimed to overcome the ambiguities

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 46. In Portuguese: “Ora, aqueles que se dedicam a esses estudos (genealógicos) sabem bem quanto de incerto, quanto de imprevisto se observa no mecanismo da hereditariedade. E se esse mecanismo já é tão incerto nos animais, muito mais o é com relação à pessoa humana. E é essa incerteza mesma que faz com que certos higienistas e eugenistas condenem a aplicação de medidas extremas como a que estamos considerando”.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-57. In Portuguese: “Pela sua comissão de higiene pública, opina a Academia de Medicina de New-York, que “a questão da esterilização de certos tipos de alienados mentais não fez grandes progressos, por duas razões. Primeiramente, existe uma prevenção geral contra a esterilização por causa das dificuldades e dos abusos possíveis que acompanham fatalmente sua aplicação; por outro lado as opiniões concernentes à hereditariedade das perturbações mentais são muito divergentes; não há, sobre esse assunto, nenhuma espécie de acordo entre os especialistas” [...] Aliás, esses abusos já foram verificados mesmo em alguns Estados da América do Norte, que adotaram, apressadamente, as opiniões dos eugenistas radicais, e concorreram para revogação, em alguns desses Estados, das leis que amparavam as intervenções esterilizadoras. Assim em New Jersey, em Nevada, em New York, no Colorado, em Ohio”.



caused by the spread of modern scientific thought. In other words, it sought to address, through science itself, the problems arising from the transgression of ethical and moral boundaries by advocates (in this case, radical eugenicists) of materialistic conceptions opposed to the Christian perception of the human being. This debate was not limited only to sterilization, but also, for example, to euthanasia, neo-Malthusian birth control, and abortion, especially regarding the intervention of the State in these matters.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the controversies between radical eugenicists and Catholic intellectuals in Brazil during the early decades of the 20th century reveals a complex and multifaceted landscape, permeated by heated debates and deep ideological divergences. At the heart of these discussions lies the clash between distinct worldviews that were reflected not only in conceptions of eugenics but also in perceptions of human nature, the role of the state, and the ethical limits of scientific intervention.

The emergence of a kind of Catholic eugenics represents one of the most striking points of this period, highlighting the influence of the Catholic Church in formulating and disseminating preventive eugenic measures. By advocating for eugenics based on the principles of Latin eugenics, the Church positioned itself as a voice in the search for solutions that reconciled scientific advances with the moral and ethical values of Catholicism.

The use of the Galilean method by Catholic intellectuals as a strategy to question the certainties defended by radical eugenicists proves to be a shrewd approach. By raising questions about the full validity of eugenic propositions and emphasizing the importance of uncertainty and inquiry in the context of scientific research, Catholics sought to undermine the thesis propagated by radical eugenicists, exemplified by those advocated by Renato Kehl, considered a grave affront to human life and dignity.

The clash between radical eugenicists and Catholics also revealed fundamental differences in the conception of human nature and the role of the state in society. While eugenicists grounded their proposals in a utilitarian and deterministic view of humanity, Catholics emphasized the importance of morality and ethics in guiding public policies, rejecting any form of instrumentalization of the human being for supposed collective objectives.

These ideological and ethical divergences shed light on the challenges faced by Brazilian society in seeking solutions to complex issues such as eugenics. By confronting the limits of science and technology, as well as the ethical, discursive, and moral dilemmas associated with state intervention in the lives of citizens, debates on eugenics in Brazil offer important lessons for the present and the future.

In summary, the study of the history of eugenics in Brazil prompts deep reflections on fundamental issues related to human nature, morality, and ethics in science and society. By exploring the controversies and complexities of this historical period, we are prompted to consider how eugenic ideas shaped both scientific thought, public policies and social relations.

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Article received for publication on 07/11/24

Approved on 08/29/24.