

CORH Values – Season 2, Episode 2

Greg Cootsona on the History of Religious and Scientific Approaches to Eugenics and Racism

Greg Cootsona, a widely published author on Religion and Science and Director of ScienceForTheChurch.org talks with us about the surprising history of eugenics in America and the ways that science and religion have been used to both justify and challenge its legitimacy. We look at how these ideas became connected to Racism more generally, and explore how Darwin's ideas about evolution through natural selection have been twisted to support harmful practices that do not acknowledge the full humanity of all people.

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Transcript:

Hello and welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the department, Daniel Veidlinger, this season is going to be focusing on social justice, Black Lives Matter. And we're going to talk about various features, how religion affects it, and the different perspectives that study of humanities can give on this topic. And with us today, we have Dr. Greg Cootsona, who teaches religion and science in our departments. He comes to us with a PhD from the Graduate Theological Union, and his focus has been on religion and science for many years. He's written a number of books on this topic, and he's got a lot of grant money to investigate how youth in particular in America today think about faith and science. Greg, welcome, Thanks. It's great to be part of this podcast. I love what you've done so far. Thanks. I really appreciate that. We've been trying to get the word out there and make an interesting series of timely podcasts give a new perspective on the events of today. And I'm really excited to be doing this particular topic. People have been talking a lot about it. Of course, Black Lives Matter has been a very big topic in the last year. In fact, it's just about a year ago that the real events that came to the forefront of every newspaper in the world began happening. So it's a good time to be talking about it. We're also exactly one year into the lock down in California and hopefully will soon becoming out of it. So that's created a lot of time for people to sit around and think about these important matters. You've been teaching a lot about science and religion, which is to me a really fascinating topic fact you just came out with a book a few months ago called Negotiating science and religion in America. That looks at the past, present, and future of these issues. And it's a really fascinating book. I would certainly recommend it for the listeners. And for today I want to focus in particular on the idea of eugenics and racism and evolution. And what kind of perspective religion can give us on these questions. That had been a really pressing issue in the whole history of America, of course. So it's not just nowadays with the Black Lives Matter movement can There's some surprising twists and turns that you talk about in the book. Let me start by asking you to explain a little bit about this term eugenics. So eugenics came fairly popular in the early 20th century in America and a lot of prominent Americans were actually in favor of some of these ideas. So can you start by saying a little bit about what the term eugenics refers to? Absolutely. And Daniel, if you don't mind, I was just going to say one thing or two things that came out of writing the book in particular, doing the research, the book that I think relate to this one is that I think almost every issue in American culture has gone through science and religion. And we are, in many ways the United States is formed off the Enlightenment and off the reformation. Those two forces are kind of science and religion. And we've tried to combine them as Americans for, for centuries. That's the first thing. The second thing is, one of the things I've learned from the methods of science is always look for, make hypotheses and find things that don't fit your hypothesis. So if I had made a hypothesis of what are you going to find if you study science and religion America, I would not have predicted that racism was such an incredible part of our history. And it really at the nexus of religion, which we'll get into what religion means in America. But religion and science, that race has been a key part of the relationship between the two. In fact, racism almost became almost overwhelmed the book, like I almost wrote another book because it was so important. So this idea of eugenics means good birth in Greek from the two words u and Genesis started really, as you said, cut steam. And the early 20th century already

was beginning in the late 19th. And I like the Oxford Dictionary of biology definition as quote, The study of methods of improving the quality of human population by the application of genetic principles. And then divides into two forms. Positive eugenics would seek to do this by selective breeding programs. A strategy that is deemed generally, is generally deemed reprehensible. Negative eugenics aims to eliminate harmful genes, EEG, those causing hemophilia and colorblindness by counseling any perspective parents who are likely to be carriers. So it's idea of making the human race better. That's what eugenics was purported to do. Of course, the problem becomes, when people have certain ideas of what better means, I think that's where it gets really interesting. So eugenics is a broad term that obviously you can tie into racism. Because you've got, well, so it seems to me that you've got individuals that might have some sort of genetic problem. So these days we can do prenatal testing and find out the genetic makeup of the fetus. And we might determine that there's going to be some serious disease. So then the question can be, well, do you want to have a selective abortion in this case? And that's a kind of eugenics I would imagine, in which there's an individual that has a problem and you have to make a decision about whether you want to bring them into the world, knowing that they will be very, very ill. But then you've got population eugenics where people say, well, we don't need to do any testing about anybody in the fetus. We just know that this kind of people have problems and it's better for us not to happen. And that's where this whole idea bleeds into racism, I think, right? Right. Yeah, and I think there's a couple of things that are that lead up to this. We today take it for granted that we wouldn't want to argue that certain races are better than others. I mean, that's, that's commonly talked about. That's part of our values as a culture. And we're going to talk about what races and a little bit. But I think that just was not the assumption in the 19th century. The assumption was that some races were better. And how do we find out which races are better than the others? So in some ways it's preceded the, the theory of evolution that we think of with Darwin and 850 has 859 Origin of Species. There was already the sense of the best cultures are going to be the ones with the best religion and those are going to produce the best people. So this could flow from Hegel's philosophy of the world spirit, the guys working through cultures. And those cultures which were most progressed had, you know, they were the best, they were the best races there were the, the smartest, et cetera, et cetera. And of course, World War one and World War Two Bring that crashing to a halt. But we can understand, if we think in the 19th century mindset, this was just a question. Everybody asks, who was the best, what's the best country? What's the best group of people, right? And that gets applied to this application of eugenics. That's a really interesting way to think of it, of course, that the idea of who's better than everybody else goes back to the dawn of time. But with Darwin and the birth of our understanding of evolution and genetics, that adds another feature to it. So before that they talked in terms of often culture and often religion. So in a sense like when, when a lot of the explorers first came to the Americas, they, I think that they felt that if they could bring the Christian religion to the native peoples, that, that alone would bring them up to what they regarded as they're left. And that brings me to the next thing I wanted to ask you about is it, so you get it. 19th century, early 20th century. An interesting twist, which is actually religious people who you would think of as quote unquote conservative that are against this to net a conception of racism. And the so-called progressive, scientifically minded people who are for it, we add, it is really fascinating. I think, I think part of what happens here is there's a myth of progress that was feeding into Darwin's theory. And so the idea was that evolution could be applied to culture and to society. And evolution in this understanding taught progress. Now of course, I think, DO YOU dealt with this really effectively in your podcast on memes and so on. That evolution just tells us what is fittest to survive in a particular environment. It doesn't necessarily progress in one way or another. So that's this idea of social Darwinism is a misapplication of Darwin, but it's actually based on this, this idea that preceded Darwin from Hegel and Keats and other people that there's a progression that keeps getting better and better. And so when Darwin had a theory that was brought into it. And so as this has picked up in the late 1800s by guard Darwin's half cousin Golson. And then in the religious communities who say, well, what is really good science is eugenics. And we want to help society because we are progressive in that sense. So we're going to use eugenic thought to help get crime reduced and to help people be better. And so you get a person like Walter Rauschenberg shoe and the early 20th century was writing the social gospel that well, we don't need just to save individual souls. We need to actually affect the society that we're a part of. And he has rank. Eugen is what I would call rank oogenesis passages of all that benighted people that you're going to help by using these techniques to improve the human race for the sake of bringing about the Kingdom of God. And so were the most interesting thing. You have the liberals who were using what was again the best science. So this is science practice by Harvard, Stanford, funded by the government, blah, blah, blah. That there

are seeking to ameliorate to the human condition in constants with their science. And it's the, the conservatives who later became the fundamentalists who are resisting it based on Christian values. So it's a flip. If people behave, it's really fast. Yeah. And I guess, did the, did the religious side of the debate use the biblical account of creation as well to point out that God created all humans as descended from Adam and Eve. Does that kind of discussion come up? Once? A more robust discussion of the different races and the height of the colonial and imperial period. When they said dividing up the world into all the classic racism through all these things written about it. Did they point out that all humans are descended from Adam and Eve and therefore of equal value. Is that an argument that was often made? Yeah, that you're the so-called *Mano Genesis*. You, that we all derive from one couple was a huge argument from the conservatives to say, we're all the same. We're all fundamentally from the same stocks. The point being, no, Yes. The conservative idea of coming from Adam and Eve, that all human beings came from Adam and Eve. That was a backstop against a budding racism. That was right, or, or, or really are religiously based races. I mean, racism of course, didn't need Darwin to exist and existed before Darwin. But here was another place where it could exist with progressive Christianity. Was progressive, I guess also different conception, right? Because it becomes more inch in size then after Darwin writes, and I think the problem with that is people think that that means therefore that there's less chance to change the behavior of a group that you don't like. Something is we were talking about before. Religion can completely up lift you to be the same level as the Europeans from the European point of view, right? But after Darwin, I think maybe fuels that. Think, well, wait a minute. Maybe even if we Christianized and they still won't be like us. Because there's something about the makeup of the instructions for their *BAD*. We would call the genes that just isn't like ours and we can't change, that changes the discourse a fair amount rights, rather the worse. I think it's interesting, I might just say exactly you're saying about the genetics course. There are two things that Darwin didn't have an austerity that he absolutely needed. He needed more time. And it was Lord Kelvin of the great Kelvin scale of heat that said there's just not time. There's, there's only about I think he had like 300 thousand years old. And that just wasn't enough revolution in the way Darwin understood it. And then he had no way of carrying on genes. Well, the gene theory hadn't been developed until Mendel around 1860. So that was a huge, That was a huge shift. And right, so Darwin didn't know about genes when, when often forgets that writes to Darwin actually didn't know even, I mean, of course they didn't know about DNA rights, but they didn't even know about genes. It was just after Darwin that Mendel did his famous work, right? Right, pea pods, is that right? Yeah, right, right after dark. And by the way, everyone will get religious, monastic, right? Exactly. That's a great exam. So it all with anything again, we think about religion and science being against one another. How many religious people were behind the development science for whatever that exact, yeah, yeah, I think that's really important. And then another thing that we're on, the topic of the scientists being the ones who cleaned to some ideas that nowadays we would regard as incorrect. And the religious people being the ones who try to forward an idea that seems to be more correct is also in, because you had some years later in the 30s, the same situation with the Big Bang, right? Again, it's religious people. They were quite excited about this idea because it seems to cohere with the biblical idea that there was one To a great explosion of night and then the world existed. And before that there was nothing. And it was in fact the scientists who believe that the world that existed, what was it? Forever, forever, yeah, their daily, daily bread oils approach. And he did it actually out of atheist grounds. He quoted the creases and said nothing comes from nothing. So there's no way we'd have the world from nothing, the intra-domain, so therefore had to always exist. And he presented that in antithesis to Einstein. And also interestingly, one of the key theorist of Big Bang was George Lemaitre, who was a Belgian and East. I mean, if you look at the theories, the equation of the Big Bang, it's the, I believe it's the Einstein Hubble equations. He's right in there. He's one of the key theorists. So yeah, I think you're right there. Sometimes we really do get these categories flipped. And, and again, it was actually the conservative biblical approach. I think that's really worth underlining of *Mano Genesis* that we all came from Adam and Eve. One couple that did not really allow for the kind of racism, racism that you see in Louis Agassiz at looks like branches into Harvard. Botanist in the early 1800s. He, he had clear racism based on the idea of polygenic says that we have these different. Ways that we've grown up as human beings. So, yeah, it's fascinating. The categories get flipped and as we tell the story sometime, we don't understand how confusing it can be. But let's back up a second because there's a term that you mentioned and I'd like to talk about it a little bit more. And that is social Darwinism. Because I think eugenics and social Darwinism can little bit confused in my mind. Yeah, this is a definition that I put into the book that I really liked. It's the theory that quote, social cultural

advance is the product of inter-group conflict and competition. And the socially elite classes, such as those possessing wealth and power, possess biological superiority in the struggle for existence. End of quote. So it's, of course, this is the late 19th century, the real expansive laissez-faire capitalism. This is a way of describing why the robber barons had all the money they had, right? Is that they were just advance. They were better, they were smarter. They should have it. That's a sign of the blessing as it were. If we can use secular language, that's a sign of the productivity of their improved genes. So if we have a capitalist system that causes there to be competition, we're going to get those people to rise and be what we would now call the job creators, right? The wealth creators. And that began to be applied to all different forms of social and cultural effects. Crime, as I said, productivity and other kinds of things, either positive or negative, that people wanted to either enhance or decrease. Is social Darwinism just a descriptive, or is it supposed to be pro script? Yeah, because I think that's for the firm. So if you're saying, Well, I see society in Darwinian terms. And the reason it looks like this is because these people are superior and they've managed to collect the power to themselves. That's one thing. But if you say that this group ought to be superior and therefore we should hurry the natural Darwinian trajectory of society, we should hurry, get along. That's when it becomes really dangerous. I mean, I think in this case, when you attach it to progressivism and the idea that we're trying to get better as a country, of course. Now I think it also as an approach sometimes that's used to reinforce the kinds of stratification in society that already exists. So I guess partly it's as soon as we make these descriptive categories like, like this, we're probably going to naturally lean into prescriptive ones, I think when supplied to the kinds of when it's connected them with eugenics, which is that aren't really the same thing, but they're related terms when it's connected to that, it gets very connected to. We should do this better for our country if we reduce the amount, sterilize the people who are the imbeciles do use language the day and write, seek to promote the marriage of those and the procreation of those who are producing more in terms of output of intellect and wealth and so on. Rather than of course, that leads to the extremes that we saw in Nazi Germany, which is the height of this kind of thinking, right? And I think that's why people are rightly very reticent to give any credence to these kinds of ideas. Because the lead very quickly really to what we saw in Germany. Did you just put one thing in there? I think it's really fascinating. You said that is, I don't really have not yet found a good historical reason why eugenics ended in the United States, except that it became embarrassing and horrific inlet of what Nazi Germany did. That's what's really fast and write NS. And if we want to get back to this later, that's what makes eugenic scary to me because with transhumanism, which always has a goal in mind with CRISPR-Cas9 as a genetic technology that can help us to engineer human beings. I'm convinced that eugenics may very well return. I think that that's very possible to, especially with transhumanism and for sure a selective genetic changes that one can do on the children. Crispr and whatever in, within our lifetimes, probably these technologies will be here. And the mean that will be eugenics by, by another name or the name might even come back, right? Well, I mean, I don't know. You mentioned selective abortion and I think we do have to struggle with us. And this is not a rant for a pro-life position at all, but it's just worth putting into the whole connection of what we're talking about with eugenics. You have Scandinavian countries where approximately related 95 percent plus of babies that would be born with Down syndrome are aborted. So what do we put that into the category of eugenics? It's kinda personal to me. I have a good friend whose daughter, who's friends whose daughter is Down syndrome. I baptized her. She's my you could say, god daughter at some level, but Laura, my daughter, She's a wonderful human being and I don't know that it's a good idea for society to abort people like her. So I think there are different technologies we can use to be eugenicist and we would want to be thoughtful about what those, what those are. Well, that's actually my point that I've thought a lot about. I talked a little bit about these issues on Episode 6 when I talked about religion as a virus, but let's talk about them now since you brought it up. To me, one of the big, forget the moral issues connected to eugenics is forget that for a minute. Just put it aside. Just practically. Because Darwin use this term, survival of the fittest. It's become very, very misconstrued and people think that they know beforehand what is most fit. And therefore they want to try to artificially engineer things so that we will just get what's most fit anyway, because why bother letting nature take its course room? We can use our human intellect and how we get along, right, and just get to the end that would have happened anyway, because we know that such and such is the most fit. Therefore, let's not bother going through the rigmarole of letting nature destroy the less fit things. Let's just do it myself. But the thing is that we don't know what's the most fit, what will work the best in any situation. We just don't know. There are way too many variables going on for us to ever be able to know and decide beforehand what is something that is so-called fit and what is not an answer I say has nothing to do with superiority or whatever we

consider desirable in human societies. In the case of your friends dot right? On paper, you might have some theorists say that it's difficult to live a life of somebody with Down syndrome, but you might have the birth com and the child live and just be a wonderful person. And in fact, it makes your life better because yes, in some ways it's harder, but in some ways you experienced more love and like it makes you into a better person because obviously it's going to be harder to be the parent of a Down syndrome child. But I've spoken to many who said that it brought so much out of them. They didn't know they had inside them love and care and maintenance that they wouldn't have known beforehand how happy they will be having a child with this condition. Right. And it just goes to show that you can't know beforehand what's going to be better for you. What I think which will initially about Lucy is, you know, she's incredibly positive. Like she's got this amazing demeanor that as a GIF, just in and of itself, could get a tune by, right? She's open about her autism. And she may go on to have influence just the key people that then worked for climate change and really get an actual proper global climate, climate change program going and saves the Earth. And so without people like that, who knows what would have had like you just do not know, right? Nature knows. But that's the thing that people forget that the key element of Darwin, I mean, there were evolutionary ideas around before Darwin. People knew that languages evolved, for example. And in fact, Darwin, Darwin was influenced by some of the linguistic literature he was reading, Yeah, looking at language families. And so the idea of evolution that things move and change over time was there. And of course, farmers have known it for centuries because they were breeding animals. I mean, they did know that you can take things in. Changes will happen over time. But Darwin, to me, his key insight was that nature does it automatically without humans having to intervene. That's the whole point of Darwinian evolution is precisely the opposite of active social Darwinism. The idea of hiring line is precisely that nature, does it. I mean, that's what communism, centralized communism of the Soviet era didn't work as well because you had a bunch of people sitting around in a room deciding we're going to make 5000 shoes this year in Odessa and we're going to make 2000 umbrellas in Minsk or whatever. I mean, they would just decide these thing, right? Maybe that's not what the market needs. It's the same sort of problem with eugenics or any sort of human deciding what they think is best. It's exactly like the communist Politburo who decided on these command five-year plans. There's just too many things going on that any human beings can ever possibly sit down and decide, this is what's good for society, right? This is what's not. And that's why this kind of thing, in my opinion, can never work. I mean, in some ways, when you grab Nazi Germany that the great irony is the very people that the National Socialists of Germany killed or forced out the country with a very scientists to develop technologies which stopped Naziism. You are talking about races minute ago. So let's talk about that because it's unclear to me what a race is. I just know that I used to lose them a lot when I was in high school on the track team. But other than that, I don't really know what it is. And of course, during the height of the imperial era, they had it all mapped out. You could see these maps of the, you know, the races of man. And they have different colors on different continents to show where the races predominant. But nowadays it's quite the opposite where people are saying that there really aren't any races at all. So which one is the k hat? I kind of, from what I read of the consensus of scientists, a little of both and would say that race is not a biological category for **** sapiens for our species, but it is a cultural category. Cultural categories are very powerful and actually can affect biology, which is really interesting. So as I've talked with biologists and I want to be very clear, I'm learning from biologist. I'm not a biologist, but I'm learning consensus science. I've been learning, right? Neither of us are experts on is it already? So that's a cave you don't want to, I'm trying to break new ground there, right? When interesting things that chimpanzees have significantly more variation than we do. And even with aggressive amongst themselves, yeah, right. And that's the fascinating part about this. It seems to go back to a bottleneck where **** sapiens, our species, appear to almost go extinct about 70000 years ago and get down to about five to 10 thousand members. So that means that you just don't have enough time to really have much variation of the kind of significant variation that creates or erased. That's the key to grasp this, because it sounds crazy to people. I mean, if you want to take a kind of progressive general approach and say, well, races incredibly important here that all the time, Let's make sure we don't forget race. But then you're also hearing the same people say, but race doesn't exist. Like, how does that exists? Well, how those go together? Well, the thing is, it's not a biological category for human beings are **** sapiens, but it is a cultural category which is very powerful. And so the idea of race is very squishy. So if I, if I'm doing the history right, when my grandfather emigrated from Macedonia, he was Macedonian, it was Greece but it was under Turkish occupations. We came in under as a Turkish person. I mean, it through Ellis Island 915. All of those things, he wouldn't have been seen as white. That's the interesting thing. I see, yeah, yeah, and Jews

weren't white. Jews were, right. And so when the 1924 Immigration Act came through and limited people so they'd be white. What they meant by white was Northern European Protestant or you go back, I understand that was the 1790 census. I believe it was they had at understanding the census, there were, I think it was five different types of black person. It's, the idea of race is really flexible. And again, that implements the flexibility is what can be manipulated to be racist ultimately. And that's what makes it really complicated to understand how to approach it today. Because, well, what is erase them? And a lot of ways we have to understand it's these cultural categories. And the problem with them is when there have been used to oppress people or to say that they're not fully human because that really did come through. That people were seen as less than human if they weren't white. Northern Europeans. That's a really great way of thinking about how malleable these categories. When if I can draw it into a contemporary, it being scientific, racism and religion into a contemporary mode. One of the things that is shocking, I think most of us is how religion has been connected with racism in our country and the rise of whiteness. I mean, that has been really, really quite scary phenomenon. And part of it is the way that people have looked back in our history. So this is why this historical work has been eye opening for me. When people say, Well, you know, America was a Christian country, we gotta go back to being a Christian country. It's losing the fact that we're a Christian country. That is why were deteriorating as, you know, as a society. And what that means really is go back to being a Northern European Protestant country, which because of all that stuff, has a very racialized component to it. And I think what my AUC science, right? They don't mean we don't have enough Armenian Christians in the mirror, right? Right, right. It's a coded way of meaning Northern rest and move, right? And I think that's where To me, the kind of science that we've talked about where the science of race isn't. Science-based is really fast and it's not supporting biological races. We can say, well, let's science and religion work together in a positive way by saying, well, okay, me, I'm maybe there were a lot of white Protestants that came with the Pilgrims and colonize this land. But that really doesn't have a very significantly that we need to understand what that means scientifically and we can begin to unwind that connection, I guess would be the way I would look at it. So I don't think these topics are just something for the 1880s or 1930s. There are things that are coming back and some very powerful ways today. There is a strong correlation sadly, today between rigorous church attendance. I'll just put it with Christianity, which is my, you know, my religious tradition and racism like that's psychologically you can, you can find that the research at PRI as demonstrated this. But I don't think that's the deep grammar of the Bible and the idea of all being created in the image of God, which of course comes from Judaism, which Christianity adopts. And really as is often also in Islam. So I think all the Abrahamic religions have that. Yeah, so it's but, but that would be a topic for another day. Why it is that, yeah, that people have great, you know, if theology or ideals and don't live up to them. Oh man, that's right. Yeah, that'll be a topic for another podcast. But for now, I would like to thank you so much Greg Cootsona for joining us. Thanks, and I wish you all the best and to you thanks for this, this great podcasts that you've put together and just the art history by which you assemble these conversations. Thank you so much, Daniel. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at CSUChico.edu slash C o r h That's [CSU CH ICO.edu](http://CSUChico.edu) slash CORH. I want to point out that the opinions expressed hear him do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our departments. Another analysis, I think of euthanasia as well. I know little bit more about youth in Asia, that I mean, I've studied Buddhist summer camps in Japan and Thailand. They have camps for the young people there. There is a Buddhist Youth Association that's a lot like the YMCA, oh I thought euthanasia as in killing. I thought we were talking about youth in Asia.