

# The Strange Case of Alexis Carrel, Eugenicist

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**ABSTRACT:** A prominent scientist, humanitarian, and spiritual author, Alexis Carrel received the highest accolades from his scientific peers and his native France. But he was also a leading eugenicist. In his prolific interwar writings he advocated the state's use of sterilization and euthanasia on eugenic grounds. In his work for the Vichy regime he directed programs aimed at the elimination of those considered unfit for existence. Carrel's eugenic theories and practices reflect the strong eugenic mentality of scientific and political elites on the eve of the Second World War.

**A**LEXIS CARREL (1873-1944) has long been renowned for two contributions. First, he was a preeminent research scientist. His invention of the mechanical heart pump and his pioneering work in organ transplantation earned him the Nobel Prize. Second, he has enjoyed a certain prestige as a religious thinker. Against the positivist medical establishment of his time, Carrel insisted on the veracity of a miracle that he witnessed at Lourdes. His defense of the reality of supernatural intervention in certain healings gave his writings a prominent place in the apologetic literature of the era.

Recent controversies in France, however, have brought to light a third dimension of Carrel's career: his prominence as a theorist and practitioner of eugenics. His widely diffused book *Man the Unknown* (1935) defends the need to eliminate defectives and criminals from society. He explicitly recommends the use of gas chambers to accomplish this goal. Under the Vichy regime (1940-1944), Carrel received the opportunity to put his eugenic theories into practice. As head of the French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems, Carrel was charged by Maréchal Pétain with the study of new methods to purify the French population of its defectives and to encourage a higher birth rate from those deemed healthy.

### Carrel the Scientist

A graduate of the medical school of the Université de Lyon, Carrel first dedicated himself to research in the area of surgery.<sup>1</sup> His first article, published in 1902, studied improvements in sutures related to the repair of damaged blood vessels. He pioneered a technique for the surgical combination of different blood vessels through the use of a special triangulated suture. In scientific literature this technique is still known as the Carrel suture. Given a position at the University of Chicago, he expanded his research on sutures to work on the transplantation of organs in animals. Moving to the Rockefeller Institute of Science in New York City in 1908, he conducted the first successful transplants of a kidney, thyroid gland, and heart on a dog. In 1910 he invented the first cardiac pump. In recognition of his research and inventions, Carrel received the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1912.

During the First World War he returned to France to assist in the war effort. His most important contribution was the development of the Carrel-Dakin method for the treatment of burns. This innovative technique saved hundreds of military and civilian lives. Returning to the Rockefeller Institute after the war, Carrel focused on the culture of tissues *in vitro*. With his close friend Charles Lindbergh, he wrote *The Culture of Organs*, published in 1938.<sup>2</sup> His research also focused on extra-corporeal circulation of blood, the use of organ tissues as grafts, and experiments on the possibility of creating an artificial heart.

Obligated to retire from the Rockefeller Institute at the age of sixty-five in 1939, Carrel returned to his native France just as the Second World War was breaking out. His important wartime contributions included hygienic improvements to the donation,

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<sup>1</sup> This biographical sketch uses material contained in the following monographs: Andres Horacio Reggiani, *God's Eugenicist; Alexis Carrel and the Sociobiology of Decline* (Oxford UK: Berghahn Books, 2007) and David M. Freeman, *The Immortalists: Charles Lindbergh, Dr. Alexis Carrel, and their Daring Quest to Live Forever* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Alexis Carrel and Charles Lindbergh, *The Culture of Organs* (New York NY: Hoeber, 1938).

conservation, and transfusion of blood and the development of a mobile military clinic that could be used at the front to aid gravely wounded soldiers. More controversial was his tenure as director of the Vichy government's French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems, a post that would involve him in the regime's efforts to encourage births from healthy French couples and to discourage or block procreation from couples considered unhealthy.

Years after his death in 1944, Carrel was honored by the French and local governments as one of the nation's preeminent scientists and humanitarians. The honors were crowned by the renaming of his alma mater, the medical school of the Université de Lyon, as the Université Alexis-Carrel.

#### Carrel the Religious Thinker

Somewhat separately from his role as a research scientist, Carrel developed a reputation as a religious thinker. Specifically, he emerged (somewhat reluctantly) as an apologist for the reality of the supernatural and the miraculous. This apologetic work would long endure in certain Catholic circles.

From the time he began his medical studies, Carrel had become an agnostic. He had abandoned the Catholic faith in which he was raised and had adopted the dominant positivism in the French medical community. According to this perspective, reality only existed in material objects than one could perceive through the senses or specialized scientific instruments.

This positivism would be shattered by a trip to Lourdes in 1903. On a train carrying pilgrims to Lourdes, he attended a sickly woman named Marie Bailly. He examined her carefully and diagnosed a terminal condition of peritonital tuberculosis. He bitterly complained to the director of the pilgrimage that this woman should not have been admitted to the train since she was in danger of imminent death. After prayer and a ritual washing at the Lourdes grotto, the woman suddenly revived. The signs of the illness quickly disappeared within a day. After repeated examinations of the woman and study of her medical file, Carrel concluded that her rapid remission could not be attributed to natural causes.

Further study of other alleged cures at Lourdes convinced him that some of them were caused by a spiritual intervention that could not be explained by material causation or by auto-suggestion. His medical colleagues at Lyon warned him that any public endorsement of the reality of miracles would cost him his position on the faculty. But Carrel began to write in defense of the existence of a spiritual world for which empirical science cannot account: "These extraordinary phenomena are of great biological, as well as religious, interest. I consider, therefore, any campaign against Lourdes to be unjustified and opposed to the progress of medical science in one of its most important aspects."<sup>3</sup> His defense of the possibility of the miraculous did indeed cost him a promising career at Lyon and was one of the causes of his departure to the more tolerant university climate of the United States. His more popular writings increasingly defended the reality of the supernatural and the power of spiritual forces which the empirical scientist cannot detect.

His posthumously published *A Voyage to Lourdes* (1950) cemented his reputation as a leading apologist for the miraculous in the Catholic world.<sup>4</sup> In the postwar era numerous works by Catholic authors lauded Carrel for his defense of the supernatural. The 1965 tribute by Jesuit Joseph Durkin, an historian at Georgetown University, is typical of the genre.<sup>5</sup> When I was a Jesuit novice, our instructor in Sacred Scripture cited passages by Carrel to encourage us to understand the possibility of miraculous healing. More recently, in 1994, the distinguished priest-scientist Stanley Jaki praised Carrel's apologetic work: "In an age of religious subjectivism and widespread theological slighting of the

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<sup>3</sup> Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown* (New York NY: Harper & Brothers, 1935), p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> See Alexis Carrel, *The Voyage to Lourdes*, preface by Charles A. Lindbergh (New York NY: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph P. Durkin, S.J., *Hope for Our Time: Alexis Carrel on Man and Society* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965). Carrel's papers were housed in the archives of Georgetown University. Durkin uses passages from private letters in the archives to refute claims of Carrel's alleged pro-Nazi sympathies in chapter nine (pp. 130-34), but the question of eugenics and euthanasia is not broached.

reality and credibility of miracles (biblical and post-biblical) Carrel's book may well serve the principal purpose of all genuine apologetics. While relatively few abandon their disbelief on being exposed to good apologetics, many are the believers who thank the same kind of apologetics for their assurance about the full intellectual respectability for their faith."<sup>6</sup> But this Catholic adulation of Carrel has always been an odd one. Carrel only returned to the Catholic Church on his deathbed, a questionable conversion given the grave accusations of collaboration with the enemy then facing him. After the voyage to Lourdes, his philosophy became a vague spiritualism, open to the transcendent but pre-occupied with such phenomena as clairvoyance and mental telepathy.

#### Carrel the Eugenicist

There is a third vocation in Carrel's life, one that has often been suppressed by his patriotic and religious supporters. He was a leading theorist and practitioner of eugenics.

In 1935 Carrel published his most popular book, *Man the Unknown*. It immediately went into multiple editions and was translated into dozens of languages. Sections were even serialized in *Reader's Digest*. The book presents his defense of the reality of the supernatural and the primacy of spiritual over purely material values. It also presents his ardent eugenicism, with its plea for the sterilization of the unfit and for the euthanasia of criminals and the insane.

In its most extreme passages the book argues that gas chambers should be used to eliminate recalcitrant criminals and those who are criminally insane: "The conditioning of petty criminals with the whip, or some more scientific procedure, followed by a short stay in the hospital, would probably suffice to insure order. Those who have murdered, robbed while armed with automatic pistol or machine gun, kidnapped children, despoiled the poor of their savings, misled the public in important matters, should be humanely and economically disposed of in small euthanasic institutions supplied with proper gases.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley L. Jaki, "Miracles and the Nobel Laureate," [www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/VOYLOUR.HTM](http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/VOYLOUR.HTM), consulted 13 June 2013.

A similar treatment could be advantageously applied to the insane, guilty of criminal acts. Modern society should not hesitate to organize itself with reference to the normal individual. Philosophical systems and sentimental prejudices must give way before such a necessity.”<sup>7</sup> Just as individual good health may require the amputation of diseased organs, the health of society itself requires the elimination of diseased members who burden it through their crime, their indolence, and the costs of their maintenance.

In the preface he wrote for the 1936 German edition of the book, Carrel praises the National Socialist government for its new eugenics program: “In Germany, the government has taken energetic measures against the increase of minorities, of the mentally ill, and of criminals. The ideal situation would be that each individual member of these classes of persons would simply be eliminated when he or she shows dangerous tendencies.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to supporting euthanasia, Carrel supports programs of sterilizations for those who carry hereditary diseases or whose families have a criminal history. Those bearing such misfortunes should be discouraged from marrying: “Those who are afflicted with a heavy ancestral burden of insanity, feeble-mindedness, or cancer should not marry. No human being has the right to bring misery to another human being. Still less, that of procreating children destined to misery. Thus, eugenics should ask for the sacrifice of many individuals.”<sup>9</sup> Although Carrel insists that voluntary renunciation of marriage and procreation by these targeted populations is the ideal, recourse to more coercive measures, such as the refusal of marriage licenses or forced sterilization, is not ruled out.

Carrel’s apology for eugenics has a distinct racial cast. Although the criminal and the mentally ill are the primary targets, non-Nordic peoples are also a matter of concern: “It is the newcomers, peasants and proletarians from primitive European countries, who beget large

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<sup>7</sup> *Man the Unknown*, pp. 318-19.

<sup>8</sup> See Alexis Carrel, *Der Mensch, das unbekannte Wesen* (Stuttgart: Dt. Verl. Ast, 1936), p. v.

<sup>9</sup> *Man the Unknown*, p. 315.

families. But their offspring are far from having the value of those who came from the first settlers of North America.”<sup>10</sup> Slavs, Jews, and Italians appear to be the unnamed targets.

Carrel received the opportunity to put some of his eugenic theories into practice when Maréchal Pétain, the head of state of the Vichy regime, named him the régent of the French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems. The Institute studied issues related to questions of nutrition, working conditions, housing, and changing population patterns. Its most clearly eugenic achievement was the passage of a law in 1942 instituting the obligatory marriage certificate. Couples seeking to marry were now required to submit to physical and psychological examination as well as to counseling on the obligations of marriage before a certificate was provided. Marriage could be refused on eugenic grounds and sterilization strongly urged or even, in rare cases, forcibly practiced.

With the collapse of the Vichy regime, Carrel was singled out for prosecution by the new French government on the grounds of collaboration and crimes against humanity. On 21 August 1944 he was relieved of all his responsibilities and placed under house arrest. His death on 5 November 1944, hastened by an earlier heart attack, ended the proceedings against him.

In subsequent years the polemics surrounding the war years faded. It was Carrel the scientist and humanitarian who perdured in the popular French imagination. Carrel the defender of the miraculous still made appearances in Catholic apologetics. But the calm suddenly disappeared in the mid-1990s. In a debate over immigration policy Bruno Mégret, the general secretary of the right-wing Front National, praised Carrel as the first and greatest of French ecologists.<sup>11</sup> With approval, he resurrected Carrel’s phrases concerning racial integrity and the need to conserve the body politic against foreign and criminal elements.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the controversy aroused by Mégret’s speech, see Andres Horacio Reggiani, “Alexis Carrel the Unknown: Eugenics and Population Research under Vichy,” *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002): 331-56.

Leftwing opponents resurrected the entire eugenics agenda of Carrel, brandishing the infamous phrase concerning gas chambers. In the most intemperate of the left-wing polemics, Patrick Tort and Lucien Bonnafé argued that the eugenic theories of Carrel had justified the euthanasia campaign of the National Socialists, right down to the method of gas chambers, and had influenced Vichy's own campaign of soft euthanasia through starvation against tens of thousands of mentally disabled inmates in state institutions.<sup>12</sup> As the polemic mounted, Université Lyon I Alexis-Carrel was *débaptisée* and rebaptized as Université Lyon I R. T. H. Laënnec. Laënnec was the apolitical inventor of the stethoscope. Carrel the eugenicist had returned.

### Conclusion

The fate of Alexis Carrel is in many ways a remarkably French affair. As many historians of contemporary France have argued, French society has experienced extraordinary difficulty in coming to terms with its past under the German occupation and the Vichy regime. Long periods of amnesia, complicated by dueling collaborationist and resistance mythologies, have not been uncommon. The erasure of Carrel's eugenicism is a chapter in that amnesia. But Carrel's enthusiastic and influential eugenicism is also a reminder of how widespread such a philosophical stance was in the early decades of the twentieth century in elite scientific and political circles. The National Socialists were by no means alone in this passion. Furthermore, Carrel's life is a cautionary moral tale. One may be intelligent, spiritual, and deeply humanitarian, and still believe that certain lives are not worth living and that the just solution to this problem is found in the painless death administered by the serene technicians in the white coats.

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<sup>12</sup> See Lucien Bonnafé and Patrick Tort, *L'Homme cet inconnu? Alexis Carrel, Jean-Marie Le Pen et les Chambres gaz* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1996).