

Christianity and GM Crops

Christian ethicists and denominational statements have, for the most part, rejected arguments that genetic engineering is inherently wrong. They have focused their ethical assessments instead on potential benefits and misuses of technologies.

Religious and secular organizations that focus their activities on the problem of world hunger have been critical of genetic engineering or, at best, neutral. Oxfam UK and Christian Aid, a British ecumenical group, have been sharply critical of genetic engineering, as has another British group, Action Aid. In the United States, both Agricultural Missions, an arm of the National Council of Churches and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference have been critical. Bread for the World, a church related group, has taken no stand on it. For these groups, the root cause of hunger is poverty — and poverty is a complex phenomenon the roots of which lie in injustice. Last year, for example, Bread for the World focused its energies on the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of Third world debt, debt which it saw as directly contributing to hunger and malnutrition.

A Christian Aid paper on 21st century development strategies identifies the critical elements in poverty as structural inequalities and lack of empowerment of the poor.

The Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development, distinguishes between "risks inherent in a technology and those that transcend it" —which is to say a distinction between bio-safety risks and those that "emanate from the political and cultural context in which a technology is used." Food safety and environmental risks would be inherent risks. They identified increasing the prosperity gap between rich and poor nations, increased inequality in the distribution of income and wealth within poor nations, and loss of biodiversity as risks transcending biotechnology. According to them, the origin of these risks does not lie in the technology. Rather, it lies "a gap between human scientific-technological ability and human willingness to shoulder moral and political responsibility".

Catholic Social Teaching: Jose Miguez Bonino, in Toward A Christian Political Ethics, emphasizes the importance of political analysis, particularly an analysis of power structures, for Christian ethics. As examples he cites the scientific-technological complex and multinational corporations. He asserts that: Science-technology has become decisively political because: (1) as never before science is power; (2) the direction in which science develops has a determining effect on all of life. . .; and (3) the mechanisms for determining and controlling this direction are in the hands of groups or organizations which themselves need to be brought to some form of accountability to the human community

When wisely used, [genetic technologies] provide positive, though limited and imperfect, solutions to such perplexing social problems as insufficient food supply, spread of disease, ecological deterioration, and human suffering (United Methodist Church 1991).

The view that such [genetic] manipulation represents a usurpation of divine privilege and a violation of the natural order of God's creation is held by many who have written to us. It remains true however, that human intervention has been pivotal in pursuing scientific and medical revelation over time; discovery and invention are the result of exercising Gods gifts of mind and reason. The possession of these powers is, in part, what it means for humanity to be created "in the image of God". Furthermore, the natural order of God's creation must be recognised and respected, but "unnaturalness" cannot itself be the source of ethical prohibition if the benefits can be shown to be very great. Genetic modification may nonetheless involve some things which ought not to be done today, but which ought not to be ruled out for ever.

"When God rested on the seventh day, it should not be supposed that He did so on account of tiredness"

Any genetic manipulation of a created being should recognise and respect the intrinsic goodness of it. This does not automatically preclude genetic manipulation, but asks that consideration be given to its consequences and to the way it serves the good of the organism that is being manipulated.

Reverence for creation cautions against haste, in favour of humility. The fundamental principle of the Good Neighbour is helpful here. A duty of care, of neighbourliness, imparts an especial regard for the well being, spiritual and physical, of our neighbours in creation on whom our actions impact. In practical terms, the purpose and manner of any GM trial requires careful evaluation to determine its impact on our neighbours in proximity and on the created order as a whole.

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