Genes, Religion and Society: The Developing Views of the Churches

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ABSTRACT: This paper (1) reviews and analyzes the positions on genetics taken in the official statements of Christian churches in the United States, together with church institutions of global status, and 2) offers suggestions about possible future responses of the churches to genetics and biotechnology.

1. STATEMENTS OF THE CHURCHES

A. General Summary of the Statements. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Christian churches have recognized the broad cultural significance of genetics research and its possible applications. Formal conversations, often in dialogue with scientists and industry representatives, have been held intermittently ever since. These conversations have produced numerous statements of broad support for basic genetics research and many possible applications. At the same time, specific concerns are raised. Notable among these are the concerns about (1) justice in the distribution of the risks and benefits of biotechnology; (2) a perceived tendency toward materialistic reductionism or commodification of the intrinsic value of human life, together with the tendency to look for medical or technological answers to fundamental human problems; and (3) the use of prenatal genetic testing and its relationship to abortion.

The statements do not contain detailed theological analysis or reflection, and they almost completely refrain from asking how theology itself must be reinterpreted in light of genetics and related sciences. For the most part, the documents appear to be addressed to the church membership, but portions of nearly every statement are obviously intended to be heeded by other audiences, from government to scientists to industry. While these statements often reflect careful discussion, they usually read as committee documents.

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Why have the churches taken the time to frame these statements? What is it about genetics that invites the response of the churches? An obvious reason is the frequent use of religious themes by scientists and science writers when they describe genetics research. The human genome is the “holy grail”, DNA is the “master molecule of life”, and editing the genetic code is “playing god”. Such use and misuse of religious language practically demands a reply from religious leaders. Furthermore, if religious language can be used to heighten the sense of drama surrounding genetics research, it can also be invoked to scare the public about the dangers. Occasionally, religious leaders and scholars themselves use such language with the intent to warn. For instance, regarding reproductive and genetic technology, theologian and ethicist Paul Ramsey wrote: “Men ought not to play God before they learn to be men, and after they have learned to be men they will not play God.”¹ For the most part, however, Christian leaders and church statements avoid such rhetoric, not merely because it is needlessly provocative, but because they reject its theology. Without exception, the statements reviewed here, far from condemning genetics as “playing god”, endorse it strongly as a significant contribution to human health and well-being. Some, notably the Catholic statements, absolutely prohibit certain applications. But none regard genetic engineering per se to be pretentious or theologically illicit.

But even the critics of the phrase “playing god” agree: Genetics (and genetic technology) evokes a religious response. Its subtlety, its power to predict and even to determine the future, its role in the mysterious processes by which life is transmitted and the organism develops, its simplicity yet staggering complexity, all serve to evoke awe. If we are not “playing god”, it is no longer because of the limits of the technology. It is because we are struggling to understand this technology, and God, in a different way, not as rival actors in nature, but the one serving the Other.

B. List of Statements. The statements reviewed in this section come from churches in the United States and from church institutions with global responsibility. These latter include the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic papal and Vatican statements. It is important to note what is omitted here: statements from other nations, including Canada and Europe, and any statements from faith traditions other than Christianity.

1. The World Council of Churches
   1975  *Genetics and the Quality of Life*
   1982  *Manipulating Life*
   1989  *Biotechnology: Its Challenges to the Churches and the World*

2. The Roman Catholic Church
   a. Vatican and Papal Statements
      1982  *Biological Research and Human Dignity*
      1983  *The Ethics of Genetic Manipulation*