

GENETICS & GOD

Some reflections after the 2001 Craigville Theological Colloquy XVIII on "Christian Faith and Genetic Ethics: A Pastoral Exploration of the Limits to Our Being Co-Creators with God"

1 In "GENETIC ETHICS: Suggested Scriptures and Questions" for the colloquy (Thinksheet #3036), the first of the eight questions was this: "What are the given limits to our being co-creators with God?" I meant the **God-given** limits, with implicit the questions (1) Where are the outer boundaries? & (2) What happens when we cross them (literally, "trans-gress")? The Colloquy planning committee gave prominence to this issue by making it the central content of the Colloquy's subtitle, which additionally stated the occupation we most hoped to help: pastors.

2 The Colloquies are for both laity & clergy; but since the underlying intention is to improve theological discourse, the majority of attendees are (UCC) clergy. A professor of biology told me he'd expected a religion-&-science conference but--as a UCC layman--was happier for the focus on pastoring: "I knew quite a bit about genetics, & benefited from learning to see it through pastors' eyes."

3 Because the Bible/world interplay is at the heart of theological discourse, every Colloquy has a highly competent biblical scholar to give us daily stimulus on the interplay vis-a-vis the topic. Before the Colloquy, registrants were to attend to Ps.139.13-18; Gn.1-3.5; Mt.10.35-37; Ro.8.22-25; Rev.21.1-7 & 22.1-2,14. Paul Hammer wisely left half his Bible-time for discussion after he skillfully & passionately interwove Scripture and Colloquy-theme issues. Because his choice of scriptures was excellent, I'm listing them here (OT on left, NT on right):

"Created in the Image of God"

Gn.1.26-31 2.7-9,15-20 Rev.4.6b-11

Ps.139.13-18 2Cor.4.1-5; Ro.1.25

"Making All Things New"

Gn.6.11-12; 9.8-13 Rev.5.11-14; 21.1-7

Is.42.5-10a 2Cor.5.17-20

"For the Healing of the Nations"

Gn.12.1-3 Rev.22.1-5 (cp.2.7; Gn.3.1-5)

Is.61.1-3 L.4.16-19

In the first of the four presentations, Dr.Hammer quoted from the latest book of the Colloquy's primary presenter, Pittsburg Theological Seminary's professor of theology and ethics, Ronald Cole-Turner: "We ask how to assess the *theological* significance of biotechnology." Four ways: "human biotechnology fits within and contributes to an essential redefinition of the human person, of relationships between persons, of social structures, and of human destiny." And our Bible presenter responds: "The categories of person, relationships, social structures, and human destiny are profoundly biblical concerns, as well as concerns of genetic ethics."

4 Colloquy work is chiefly in small groups, which are asked to specialize in one of several questions (taking a card of the question off the post-board). Here were this Colloquy's questions (each question having two cards, so one question may have been addressed by one or two groups):

1 POTENTIAL: Should everything that can be done be done?

2 JUSTICE: How can there be a compassionate allocation of resources?

3 IDENTITY: How is it determined by genes, faith, freedom?

4 SUFFERING: Where is the Good News in genetic technology?

Each group formally (in writing, one page) reports in the last evening's session.

5 On the Colloquy's second day, the **embryonic stem cell** issue (should the President favor government funding?) was on p.1, the ed.p., & the op.ed.p. of the CAPE TIMES & the newspapers I read those parts of daily on the web (BOSTON GLOBE and NEW YORK TIMES). I asked the Colloquy participants to phone the White House Comment Line (easy to remember: it forms a cross on your phone pad: 1.202.456.1111)* to tell Geo.W. which side to come down on. Our government is one-person-ONLY-one-vote for those who don't phone the President, their senators, & their representative to tell them specifically what to do, what to support, what to oppose: those who do phone have, as it were, more than one vote.

* E-mail is faster: president@whitehouse.gov

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6 I resisted an informal move to politicize the Colloquy by getting us to make, as a group, a statement on embryonic stem-cell research even though I personally am fully for it: we had other fish to fry. For a decade, Britain has supported ESCR (embryonic stem-cell research, using test-tube embryos slated by the donors for disposal); & now, as of less than a week ago, we have in the USA the production of embryos specifically for stem-cell research (& thus specifically not intended for procreation [& thus a new category of embryo, morally superior--say the makers--to the use of procreation-intended embryos]).

But stem cells are derivable from many human parts, the problem to date being quality. Ideally the focus will move away from areas making pro-life folks angry.

7 My opinion: stem-cell research & application, wide-open; germ-cell, tight closed (because messing with human germ-cells changes heredity). (The UCC pastor who headed our Colloquy's presentation team, R.C.-T., was for two years co-chair of an Am.Ass'n. for the Advancement of Science study on the ethical and religious implications of human germ-line modification.)

8 In '68 (*Humani Vitae*), the Pope changed a question mark (non-rhythm-method contraception OK?) into a period (no!). In '73 (*Roe v. Wade*), the U.S.Sup.Crt. changed a question mark (right to abortion-access?) into a period (yes!). Yesterday (7.23.01) the Pope, appearing with Geo.W.Bush, called embryonic stem-cell research "evil": as does non-rhythm-method contraception, it violates the potential flow of life. Today in Africa the RC bishops are meeting to decide, face to face with the AIDS holocaust, whether to continue to oppose condoms or to violate '68. In my view, & that of most Roman Catholics, those bishops' continued resistance to condoms (& other physical contraceptives) would be, indeed, evil. Rome's conundrum is that surrendering *Humani Vitae* would be a rent in the seamless-garment mentality of "the gospel of life": humanity should not frustrate sperms seeking eggs, embryos seeking to become people, or human bodies seeking to remain alive (so no abortion, murder, suicide [physician-assisted or not], or war). A neat, high-decible-rhetorical teaching which (1) badly misfits the unneat, messy human condition & (2) could have been conceived (sic) by no other human group than celibate males. The teaching intends good but is, in its effects as an ethic, more evil than good--an embarrassment, not a glory, to the Faith in the eyes not only of the world but also many if not most of the faithful.

Faithful as it should be to the old reality of "the Faith once received," the Vatican is--sadly--on a collision course with some new realities. As to the latter, thank God that Rome has in the Christian world no more influence than it has. Just think what a tragedy would be the Christian world's submission to papal primacy! A wise-saying of Paul Valéry (THE NATION 1.5.57): "Two dangers constantly threaten the world: order and disorder." Personally (genetically? environmentally? empirically?) I fear the former more than the latter. From order we got the Inquisition: from disorder (*tohu v'bohu* Gn.1.2) we got the Creation.

9 In the 7.15.01 WASHINGTON POST, Rick Weiss' "Changing Conceptions" makes these pertinent points (though not in this order): (1) For making human beings, embryos are unnecessary: cloning; (2) A womb-unattached embryo is not a "potential" human being but only a "possible" one: it does not have the capacity to become a person; (3) Embryos in themselves, says conservative Sen. Orin Hatch, can't grow so they're not "babies" but only (Weiss' term) "pre-people"; (4) Two new realities are heating up the when-human-life-begins debate: (1) Our increasing population of in-vitro Americans; & (b) Photography & ultrasound, "strengthening the emotional bond to the unborn."

All Weiss' change-points have obvious bearing on genetic-technology issues.

10 At Berea (B., KY) College two summers ago, I was reminded--by seeing it on a truck--of the school's logo, which includes "God has made of one blood [my underlining] all the peoples of the earth." Yes, Ac.17.26 (Gk., "from one" [NRSV should not have narrowed down by adding "ancestor"]). Think how radical the founders were--in 1855!--in abolishing the South's myth of blood distinction between white massa & black nigga! And thank God for genetic-science's under-scoring of the abolition! (More radicality: no tuition; ceiling on parental income; & all students working on campus.)