Religion and Gene Patenting

Ronald Cole-Turner

On 18 May 1995, a group of nearly 200 religious leaders issued the following statement opposing the patenting of life:

We, the undersigned religious leaders, oppose the patenting of human and animal life forms. We are disturbed by the U.S. Patent Office's recent decision to patent human body parts and several genetically engineered animals. We believe that humans and animals are creations of God, not humans, and as such should not be patented as human inventions (*1*).

A press release that accompanied the statement made it clear that all patenting of DNA sequences was opposed (*2*). Equally clear is the intent to put pressure on politicians to reform patent law.

The popular press, including television evening news, reported this statement as "religion versus science." *USA Today* featured it as "Today's Debate: Genetics versus Religion" and carried a column by Jeremy Rifkin, longtime critic of biotechnology, writing as the representative of the religious leaders (*3*). The statement was cosponsored by Rifkin's Foundation for Economic Trends and by the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, and those who signed represented 80 different religious bodies. The fact that so many religious leaders joined forces with Rifkin in signing such a broad and categorical statement was seen, with some justification, as another page in a long history of conflict between science and religion.

In this interpretation, however, the popular press ignored two important considerations. First is the strong support that many religious leaders over the centuries have in fact given to science. Recent scholarship is showing that the "warfare between science and religion" is turning out to be mostly myth, kept alive by those who want to push these two great human endeavors—the need to focus in communities on our deepest moral and spiritual yearnings, and the longing to understand the natural world of which we are a part—into opposing camps. The fact is that many religious leaders have seen science as a means to achieve the goals of religion, namely, to help and to heal. Religion gives science its purpose, and science gives religion its eyes and its hands.

For example, consider one large religious body, the United Methodist Church. Although it is true that the leaders of today's United Methodist Church cosponsored the statement with Rifkin, it is also true, and far more significant, that the organizer of the Methodist Church, John Wesley, was so interested in health and medicine that he wrote several pamphlets and books on the subject. A contemporary of Benjamin Franklin, Wesley was particularly intrigued by electricity as a medical treatment, and he edited the writings of physicians for the general public (*4*). Wesley's convictions continue today in the large number of hospitals and research universities related to the Methodist Church. To characterize Wesley or the church he organized as anti-science is simply unfounded.

Several Christian religious bodies have spoken officially on genetics. In none of these statements does the language resemble that in the statement of 18 May. In 1989, the United Church of Christ said of genetic engineering, "we welcome its development, pledging to support a climate of thoughtful reflection, public awareness, appropriate regulation and justice in distribution." The United Methodist Church, meeting in 1992, said, "Genetic techniques have enormous potential for enhancing creation and human life when they are applied to environmental, agricultural, and medical problems."

The National Council of Churches, an affiliation of about 30 denominations, said in 1986, "Scientists, investors and managers who provide the knowledge and capital necessary for biotechnological development and marketing deserve fair compensation for their ingenuity, work, and willingness to incur economic risks" (*5*).

Religious statements on genetics have been cautiously supportive, in contrast to Rifkin's personal views. The reason for this difference lies at a deeper level: Rifkin's ideas are those of a vitalist, whereas most religious traditions in America today are theistic. A vitalist tends to see all life as sacred and thus as off-limits for alteration or ownership. Theists, however, believe that only God is sacred. Everything else is God's creation, and although creation should be treated with respect, there is no metaphysical difference between DNA and other complex chemicals. Therefore, there is no distinctly religious ground for objecting to patenting of DNA (*5*). Some religious communities, of course, draw a strong line between human and nonhuman life. Interestingly, neither Rifkin nor the 18 May statement draws such a line. Those who do draw it believe that human life must be treated with utmost dignity. Human embryos should not be manipulated, and any human germline experimentation would be prohibited. Other theists, however, would be open to consider the technical arguments for the benefit of germline experimentation. The 1989 United Church of Christ statement expresses such openness.

Unlike Rifkin, theists would not say that all DNA sequences are in a category that is metaphysically or theologically distinct from other molecules. Some religious leaders believe that the patent process is not the best way to stimulate the development of biotechnology and that ultimately it is an affront to the dignity of creation. Other religious leaders believe that, although it could probably be improved, the patent process is an appropriate response to the need to protect intellectual property and to form the capital required for product development. The alternatives to patents, such as increased secrecy, may be far worse.

In reporting the 18 May statement, the popular press ignored a second important fact, namely, that today's religious communities are opening channels of dialogue with the institutions of science. Several denominations now have special committees to help the churches respond to developments in science and technology. The attitude of Wesley, not Rifkin, clearly dominates. The conviction that guides this movement is simple: When science and religion are opposed, both science and religion suffer, and so do all human beings and so eventually will life as we know it. When science and religion work together, there is at least the chance that we will be able to chart a responsible and sustainable future.

Those of us who work in these committees face the great challenge of persuading the churches and their leaders that if we are to be credible and helpful in the future, we must learn much from science. Contemporary science, genetics in particular, poses profound moral questions. Religious leaders who are both knowledgeable and humble are needed at the table of public discourse about the shape of our common future. Scientists themselves may have the most to lose when discourse fails.

The author is a professor of theology, Memphis Theological Seminary, 168 East Parkway South, Memphis, TN 38104, USA, and a member of the AAAS Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility.

References

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3. "Today's Debate: Genetics versus Religion," *USA Today*, 19 May 1995, p. 12A.
4. E. Brooks Holifield, *Health and Medicine in the Methodist Tradition* (Crossroad, New York, 1986).
5. R. Cole-Turner, *The New Genesis: Theology and the Genetic Revolution* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1993).