

Friends Testimonies and Biotechnology: Can We Speak for the Commonwealth of Life?

This article was written by Keith Helmuth, member of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting, after discussions with Anne Mitchell, member of Toronto Monthly Meeting, who recently attended the World Council of Churches Global Consultation on Genetics and New Biotechnologies in December 2007. It has been developed to help Quakers and others in faith traditions to reflect and act on concerns about biotechnology.

THE WORLD VIEW OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

Friends have been generally reticent on theology, but articulate on world view. Metaphysical speculation gets short shrift among Friends, but the world view of right relationship is clearly focused in Quaker testimonies. The world view of right relationship is experiential. It pays close attention to the conditions and processes of life, and gauges the ethics of decision making as closely as possible to the well being of persons and places.

This approach served Friends well as the culture of science emerged in the modernizing world, and its investigations greatly altered the common sense of reality. As scientific work advanced, the world, in general, was shown to be composed not so much of fixed objects, as of relationships. True enough, discrete forms are plain to see, but the deep story of earth and its commonwealth of life is now increasingly understood as process and relationship.



Because Quakers have understood continuing revelation to be the way of things, the new maps of reality drafted by science generally caused no stop in the minds of Friends. Quakers, in fact, became key figures in scientific work and helped create the scientific world view. This world view, until recently, rested on the assumption of a structurally dependable world, a world that may have its fluctuations and deviations but always returns to its ground rules of good order.

In recent times, however certain avenues of scientific work have emerged that have given this world view a real twist, and have caused a big hesitation, and sometimes a complete stop, in the minds of many folks, including some Friends. The sciences of molecular biotechnology and bioengineering have changed the game with respect to the processes and relationships of life. The question of right relationship in this new complex of science and technology is highly problematic, and, in some respects, seems completely off the agenda.

ISSUES POSED BY BIOTECHNOLOGY & BIOENGINEERING

Here are the main features that make biotechnology and bioengineering a special problem for the world view of right relationship.

1. Biomolecular engineering has allowed scientists to isolate and scrutinize single genes, thereby making possible the alteration of genetic material and its transfer from one organism to another.
2. These technologies have made it possible to move genes and the information they express within and across species.
3. Not only are these technologies transforming fruits, vegetables, and livestock, but they are now poised to alter the human species in a variety of ways.
4. Industrialized food and pharmaceutical corporations are systematically altering crop seeds and plant derived medicines in order to claim them as "inventions" and place them under international patent and trade regulation protection. This makes it illegal, in many cases, for farmers and indigenous peoples to save and plant seeds or prepare medicines that are related, even remotely, to the biotechnology products.
5. These technologies - from development through deployment - are fully immersed in the swift currents of capital driven economics.
6. Capital driven economics is marked by neo-liberal free trade accords that favour large corporations, and the accumulation of wealth that is widening the divide between rich and poor, both within and between nations.

If we take human solidarity as our moral compass, and right relationship as the map of Friends testimonies, we can explore a Quaker approach to these new technologies. Before going further, however, something of the world view of genetic research should be put into this picture. Of all the conceptual arrangements through which rationality can be focused, one, in particular, carries the day in biomolecular science and the culture that surrounds it – genetic rationality.

FRIENDS TESTIMONIES AND THE CULTURE OF GENETIC RATIONALITY

Genetic rationality came into effect when it was first understood that genes carry traits, that traits are inherited, and that selective reproduction can emphasize or repress traits. If this was, indeed, the key to understanding continuity and change in life process, the rational mind had now found the biotic holy grail. With the development of biomolecular engineering, all other factors of significance in the history of life fell to a subordinate level, and genetic rationality moved into a command and control position over virtually the whole range of biotic expression. This convergence of an unprecedented and extraordinarily powerful technology with the bias of rationality, has created an almost irresistible momentum for open ended manipulation of biotic process and form.



The bias of rationality is to be on the hunt for the *one best way* in whatever field is being investigated. In biomolecular engineering, rationality has found a royal road, a *one best way* to investigate and change the biotic world.

What can it mean to apply Friends testimonies to biotechnology and the culture of genetic rationality? Is the world view of right relationship in any way commensurate with the power of this research? How does the ethic of human solidarity begin to encompass this engine of wealth?

A brief review of Friends testimonies, along with some contrasting characteristics of biomolecular engineering and its commercial development, will help create a platform from which further scrutiny can be launched.

Simplicity: Simplicity is, in large part, about focusing on relationships and processes that are funda-

mental to a well balanced life. In practice, this can be fairly complex. A well balanced life may be composed of many elements, but if these elements intersect with a high degree of right relationship, a kind of higher simplicity emerges in our sense of guidance and well being.

“Perhaps here, most of all, Friends discernment and testimonies are called to ask; “What about community? What about equity? What about solidarity? What about right relationship?”

Biotechnology has a very different orientation. It is not interested in achieving balanced functioning within natural and social systems. Natural and social systems are often the problem it seeks to overcome. Biotech is aimed at unbalancing natural and social systems in favour of controlled, selective benefit and capital accumulation.

Peace: The Quaker peace testimony manifests in both personal life and in larger social forms. Here too, the ethic of right relationship serves the full spectrum of peace concerns. The domain of peace includes nonviolent living, conflict prevention and resolution, and reducing the causes of conflict, violence and war.

It is well known that war and preparation for war stimulates scientific research and technology development. Biotechnology is no exception. It is firmly ensconced in the military saddle. The U.S. national security establishment is deeply involved with biotechnology. The biotech we hear about is mostly aimed at health improvement and yield per acre of food crops. But, apparently, this is just the opening act. The full story is yet to come. Think, bioengineered “war fighters.” Think, food crop control, population management, and cognitive manipulation.

Equality: The testimony on equality is best thought of as the ethic of equity. Equity means a fair share, a valued status, the prospect of a fulfilling and productive life. It means recognition and respect, and the life circumstances that draw out and support human dignity.

Biotechnology’s relationship to equity is complex and increasingly problematic. The promise of the “green revolution” in agriculture, having run into a myriad of unforeseen problems and unintended consequences, has mostly stalled. Through inequitable trade agreements and quasi-legal regulations, agri-industry and pharmaceutical giants are systematically enclosing the genetic commons, turning germ plasma into a commodity over which they then have exclusive control. Because biotechnology has developed mainly within the domain of capital driven economics, its products and services are, and will be, available only to those who can pay for them at a level that advances capital accumulation for the already wealthy.

Integrity: The testimony on integrity is a linchpin testimony. It vitalizes and validates all the rest. At the first level it encompasses truthfulness and ethical consistency. In a widening perspective it includes devotion to right relationship and the high valuing of direct experience in the formation of knowledge and judgment.



Biotechnology, on the other hand, is committed, front and centre, to the manipulation of integrity. It works for the enclosure, monopolistic control, and commercialization of integral biotic components, and for their excavation and transplantation into now redesigned organisms that will yield market value. Here we meet the full force of the biotech industry. To *the one best way* of genetic rationality it has added *the one best way* of market rationality. This is a formidable cultural alliance which, in effect, has become a new religion, a new faith on how humanity – or, at least, part of it - should proceed into the future.

Community: Largely because Friends have had an enduring concern for right relationship, and because Friends have a well-tended tradition of collaborative discernment in decision making, the soul of community has been kept alive in Quakerism. Community has thus become a special witness and testimony of experience, a witness for right relationship and a testimony about communion.

“What good is almost perfect health or enhanced cognitive power if you don’t have a functional community and a world at peace?”

In contrast, biotech has no particular interest in community. It is focused on the individual components of organisms and on individual organisms. From the office towers of Monsanto to the Wistar Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, biotechnology, whether dealing with a rice plant or a research subject in a therapy trial, has a consistent point of view – the state of the individual organism and the opportunity to modify it. No thoughts of community trouble biotech’s focus on the individual. This is a dangerous blind spot in so powerful an industry. With respect to the integral reality of human experience, community is the key to resilience and a hopeful future, not individual organisms and genetic manipulation.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE: QUESTIONS FOR QUAKERS

Perhaps here, most of all, Friends discernment and testimonies are called to ask; “What about community? What about equity? What about solidarity? What about right relationship? What about the commonwealth of life? What good is a high yield crop if an increasing number of people can’t afford the price? What good is almost perfect health or

enhanced cognitive powers if you don’t have a functional community and a world at peace? From the standpoint of Friends testimonies, two questions about biotech and other powerful new technologies come into view: 1) How can their benefits be developed and applied in an equitable way? 2) How can damaging and potentially disastrous consequences to ecosystems and social systems be foreseen and forestalled? Addressing these questions requires us to understand the convergence of moral, ecological, economic, and political realities in the biotechnology context, and then ask how can we effectively engage in public participation work on biotechnology policy.

There is a mounting wave of moral energy looking for effective focus in which the convergence of justice, peace and ecological integrity can be seen. Friends testimonies, which are clearly shared by millions of people world wide, are a prime site of this convergence. *We can* speak with confidence for the commonwealth of life. *We can* help create community based and stake holder arrangements that engage the public policy dialogue on biotechnology management. Thus can Friends testimonies enter fully into the life of the world on this critical issue at this critical time.



CANADIAN INSTITUTE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY

L'INSTITUT CANADIEN DU
DROIT ET DE LA POLITIQUE
DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT

www.cielap.org

This factsheet has been prepared by CIELAP for Quaker Institute for the Future (QIF).

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Samuel Rogers Memorial Trust for the preparation of this factsheet.



www.quakerinstitute.org