

Quakers & Synthetic Biology

We seek nonviolent ways of meeting the needs of our species without compromising the viability of other species with whom we share this Earth.

- Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends
(2011 minute on sustainability)

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is known for its active work on nonviolence and what is called "positive" peace - i.e. peace grounded in just conditions, not merely the absence of war. In presenting The Religious Society of Friends with the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize, Norwegian leader Gunnar Jahn said,

“ *The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to translate into action what lies deep in the hearts of many: compassion for others and the desire to help them - that rich expression of the sympathy between all men, regardless of nationality or race, which, transformed into deeds, must form the basis for lasting peace.*

But what does this have to do with synthetic biology?

In 2013, ten Quaker congregations from across Canada formed study groups and spent months learning about and discussing synthetic biology. Here are some of the key ideas they raised:

- *"Science and mind are expressions of spirit. They could be used to create a more equitable world."*
- *We must "honour the integrity of creation, and the interdependence of humans and other beings."*
- *"If, as a culture, you had a basic notion of the sacredness of community-not just the human community -you would automatically put safeguards in place."*
- *"The issue is of very great importance, its implications are almost overwhelmingly vast and, inadequate as we may feel, we must grapple with it and respond."*

- *"When we change the biology of life, we can't know the consequences."*
- *"It may be helpful to avoid taking a fixed position, since our continuing lives and experience will contribute to our spiritual insight."*
- *"The profit motive is guiding developments without concern for common good."*
- *Synthetic biology research and development "should be governed by: a) a comprehensive risk assessment process, b) the precautionary principle, and c) a code of commitment to the common good."*
- *Friends do not believe in perfect containment or predictability of future developments of the products of synthetic biology. "It is not a question of if there is a problem, but when there is a problem. An example is tankers: back in the 60's people were raising questions about whether some day there might be a problem, long before the Exxon Valdez spill."*
- *"Are we smart enough not to kill ourselves?"*
- *"We advocate that the potential benefits of synthetic biology be pursued with reverence for life and social values, consistent with Quaker and other groups' spiritual values."*

The subject of synthetic biology has caught the attention of few people. When the UN Environmental Program's Convention on Biodiversity decided to formally examine relationships between biodiversity and synthetic biology, the Canadian Friends Service Committee took action and joined the CBD's process for discussion. Relevant to this effort by CFSC is what Tom Farer calls a "facilitative dimension of law: law as a means of enabling persons to cooperate over time by embodying their collective goals in a body of rules, principles and policies." Friends hope the Convention on Biological Diversity can play such a role with respect to synthetic biology.