

GLOBAL CONSULTATION ON GENETICS AND NEW BIOTECHNOLOGIES AND
THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH, JOHANNESBURG SOUTH AFRICA

DECEMBER 2-5, 2007

BIOETHICS AND BIOTECHNOLOGIES: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES
FROM A CARIBBEAN ANGLICAN

My task is that of addressing Bioethics and Biotechnologies from the Church's perspective. I do not claim to be any authority on bioethics and biotechnology. What I will attempt to do in this presentation, is give a perspective from a Christian point of view and more especially as one who practices the faith in the Anglican or Episcopal tradition. In addition, I am doing so as an ecumenical representative of the Caribbean Conference of Churches as well as one who teaches Christian ethics in an ecumenical institution – the United Theological College of the West Indies.

I was privileged to be part of the planning committee for this consultation and at the time I pointed out that in the Caribbean, and the West Indies in particular, our concerns about the topic at hand have to be viewed in the context of life and death as well as poverty and debt. The former are natural experiences with which we must contend and the latter are human generated experiences that demean and undermine the quality of human life on the planet.

The demeaning and undermining of human life is not new experiences for us in the Caribbean. Slavery and its evolutionary companion, colonialism, have been successive means of demeaning and devaluing human life in the Caribbean and other places in the world. The forced migration of people from the 15th century to the present has resulted in the marginalization of the majority for the benefit of a few. It is for this reason a number of our dancehall artistes, and other reggae singers in Jamaica, attack the “system” which they perceive as a means of perpetuating the oppression of the many. For them, the system is that which sets the majority apart from the few and ensures that the divide is never breached. Places like Jamaica, where descendants of numerous races have been forced to domicile, have nevertheless developed strategies for persons to live lives that are meaningful. We live despite the obstacles to development and with the realization that the good life is always the goal. The good life is that life which envisages a good quality life in community for all. It ensures that everyone has access to the basic necessities of life for the development of all creation. The pursuit of development has been marked by years of struggle. The present generation is, therefore, charged with the legacy of carrying on the struggles bequeathed to it by our forebears. It is by continuing the struggle that we will ultimately reverse the negative trend of the past six hundred years or more.

a. The evolution of our societies

It is not by accident that Anglican theology, generally speaking, begins with anthropology. The incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ, and by extension, the continued

incarnation in all of life, tells the tale of a God who is still in love with creation and desires its welfare and wellbeing. It is not by accident, then, that the Church raises questions about research and development that do not facilitate the whole human race enjoying the goodness of life. It is against this background that we suggest that research and development have not always been for the benefit of the majority of people in developing countries for a number of years. Research and development have been generally viewed as means toward profit and not necessarily toward human flourishing. Whenever and wherever people-centred research has been carried out over the years the general objective has been to advance the cause of a few at the expense of the many. The challenges confronting us, with respect to bioethics and biotechnologies, are nothing new. Those from contexts such as ours are always mindful that “he who pays the piper calls the tune,” that is, those who pay the researcher usually benefit most from the results of the research. The Church’s intervention in this discussion, therefore, has to be viewed from the perspective of how, and to what extent, the majority of our people in the developing world will benefit from research in general and research in bioethics and the use of biotechnologies? Because the Church is concerned with the welfare of people, and indeed all of creation, it has to focus on the goal of advancing the welfare of the whole human race.

b. The challenges of the present

It is against the background of the benefit of research to the majority that we need to understand the Church’s response to the discussion of bioethics and biotechnologies. In a

presentation on the Church's response to stem cell research, held at the University of the West Indies in 1995, Bishop Gregory made the following point:

The human being, in any form of his/her existence, should not be treated as a subject for research like any other part of the created order. The high value of human life which demands that it not be treated merely as a subject for experimentation and research cannot be easily dismissed as something which does not apply to the field of medical research.

Bishop Gregory is upholding the age-old principle of ethics, made popular by Immanuel Kant, that human beings should be treated as ends and not as means to an end. As I said earlier, ours is a history laden with experiences of human beings treated as objects to be exploited and abused so you will appreciate the Bishop's concern. The Bishop's concern is echoed in a document published on the Anglican Community's website on the subject of genetically modified (GM) foods. The view expressed is that research into GM foods is not in itself harmful. The document warns, however, that:

It by no means follows, however, that everything that can be done, should be done. There is a reverence due to the goodness of nature, seen as being God's creation. Major scientific discoveries confer knowledge, and the power that comes from knowledge, but if we are to choose the right and refuse the bad, we shall have to add wisdom to knowledge in order to make that discrimination. Here the religious traditions, which are reservoirs of wisdom accumulated and

sifted over the centuries, have a vital role to play in helping society to reach the right conclusions. Wisdom is unlikely to lie either in an unrestricted exploitation or in a total prohibition, but in a careful consideration of individual proposals. In this respect, genetic engineering does not seem very different from other forms of scientific advance.

Both Bishop Gregory and the Anglican Communion are of the view that research is necessary. However, such research should be a means to advancing the welfare of the human race and not the exploitation of a small number for the benefit of a small number.

2. The context of research and development

a. Research and technology

The context in which Bishop Gregory spoke is the inauguration of the Caribbean Ethics Conference held at the UWI. It is instructive that the University chose not one but two Church representatives to address its conference. This gesture is an indication of the University's stance that research in general and medical research in particular should have as its accompaniment the theological perspective. This perspective is necessary to provide the requisite checks and balances needed to facilitate research and the use of technology that is human and environmentally friendly.

b. Our developing status

Our developing status as a nation and as a region requires that we draw on all the resources necessary for the development of our people, particularly the poor and marginalized. In this regard the treatment of persons affected and infected with HIV and AIDS has to take centre stage in any discussion. The Anglican Church is growing the fastest in Africa. It is in Africa, particularly the sub Saharan region that people are mostly infected and affected. The notion that AIDS has come to Church is not a foreign issue any longer. The Caribbean is second to Africa in terms of the infection rate. Recent data from the United Nations, which suggest that the rate of infection has slowed, is comforting. However, for us, this is no time to relax. We are still mindful that there is no cure for the disease. We encourage the efforts of scientists, and those who provide the funding, to continue working on our behalf to hopefully emerge with a cure. In the meanwhile we have to provide the necessary pastoral and material support needed by those who are affected and/or infected.

c. Debt and poverty

Some of our countries have been classified as middle-income countries. This classification makes good ideological reading. The fact is, however, a number of us are still saddled by a humongous debt and there is no sign that we will be relieved any time soon. We have resolved ourselves to care for the most vulnerable and so our government has taken a policy decision that the most vulnerable, who are infected and need to be on anti retroviral therapy, will be given the medication free of cost. The position helps the

ministry the Church offers to these persons since the Church can then concentrate on providing other support services.

3. The context for research in Bioethics and Biotechnologies

a. HIV/AIDS

As was mentioned earlier, one of the primary concerns of the people of the Caribbean is the infection rate of HIV. Support for bioethics and biotechnologies is in keeping with the hope that such technology and methods of research will help to identify a cure for this disease as well as numerous other diseases affecting developing countries.

b. Stem cell research

Stem cell research, for example, which seeks to advance or improve on current treatment of numerous diseases, can only benefit the human project of becoming that which God wants us to become. According to the document on the Anglican Communion web site referred to earlier,

Stem cell is the name given to the cells that become the more than 200 different types of cell in the human body. They exist in the early embryo, in the fetus, in the placenta and umbilical cord, and in many, possibly most, tissues of the

body. Because of their ability to reproduce themselves, and to differentiate into other cell types, stem cells offer the prospect of developing cell-based treatments, both to repair or replace tissues damaged by fractures, burns and other injuries, and to treat a wide range of very common degenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, cardiac failure, diabetes, and Parkinson's disease.

c. Research and development

The Church celebrates and affirms stem cell research and any other kind of research, which can help to improve the quality of human life in the world. Bishop Gregory, in the speech I quoted earlier, presents a caveat, which we cannot ignore. He says; **when human life in any shape or form is treated as a dispensable and disposable commodity, then we are treading on dangerous grounds...**[I], believe, he continues, **that human life even at its most immature stage, should not be scavenged for the purpose of medical research.** It is not too much to ask, therefore, that caution should always be exercised as we proceed with such research agenda. Such pursuit should be made with the ethical adage in mind: the greatest good for the greatest number.

Researchers need to be careful about looking after the needs of special interest groups and not the majority of people affected. It is true that those who provide the resources for research will be looking to maximize the benefits. The Church does not condemn such action, what cannot be supported is exploitation of the majority for the benefit of a few.

The virtue of justice should always be the guiding principle of research and the goal of making human life more human ought to be kept in the forefront of research.

4. The context for Christian ethical reflection

a. Do good and not harm

The Anglican Church's position on GM foods is instructive as I bring this presentation to a close. According to the Church of England,

“From time to time, public thinking about the use of new scientific techniques can be unduly influenced by slogan words that are unreflectively taken to carry sinister meanings. A striking example of this happening has been with irradiated food. This carefully controlled process is effective in making food safer by killing harmful bacteria. However, public fear inspired by the word ‘radiation’ (perceived as invariably signifying an invisible menace) led to demands for labelling, which in turn proved to be the kiss of death for this food safety measure because of unjustified public fear. It would be regrettable if a similar story repeated itself in relation to GM foods.

“As with almost all scientific and technical developments, GMOs offer opportunities for good use and for bad use. As

with almost all scientific and technical developments, careful review and monitoring of their use is important, particularly in the early years of development. It would be unwise, either to ban GMOs from foods, or to fail to keep their use under scrutiny.”

b. Remember the most vulnerable

Bishop Gregory raises the issue of organ donation as a concern for considering the place of the vulnerable in society. He is concerned about the use of the organ of one human being to extend the life of another. While he is not totally against the practice he warns against using this approach to stop the process of persons coming to terms with the limits of human life and living. In order that we may advance within limits the Bishop makes the following point:

The Church’s concern has centred around the extent to which we understand that decisions concerning experimentation using the human being as its subject must be subject to social concern and ethical and legal judgement and not just professional competence. While we have no guarantee ... we must ensure that a proper framework of accountability and limits is set for research within the formal structures of society.

Bishop Gregory echoes the mind of the Church throughout the age, which views the goal of human action as partnership with the divine. Suroupch action should be geared towards human flourishing and, it is to this end, that he stresses the need for accountability. Researches need to rekindle the notion of accountability to their peers as well as to the wider human project of making human life more human.

Discussion concerning the most vulnerable also has to focus on persons living with disabilities. It is being proposed that injuries, such as those of the spinal cord, could see better treatment, thanks to the possibility of new discoveries in stem cell research. Those in the community are, nevertheless, warning that research does not mean ‘one size fits all,’ meaning that we need to be cautious about viewing research as beneficial to a homogenous group. In the community of persons living with disability individuals are as different as other individuals living in other communities.

The general secretary of the Caribbean Council is concerned about the potential use of women as subjects in research. He is of the view that women are already in the vulnerable group in society. He is therefore of the view that, particularly when it comes to using human beings as subjects for research, and women in particular, careful attention ought to be given for the screening of such activities.

c. The means do not always justify the end

Finally, human beings should be both the subject and the object of research. This by no means suggests that the remainder of God's creation should be ignored for the sake of human flourishing, by no means. We have to be mindful of St. Paul's note that it is the whole creation that is groaning as it anticipates its ultimate fulfilment in God. At the beginning of the presentation, and throughout, I pointed to the historical use of human beings as means to an end. Research in bioethics and the use of biotechnologies ought not to be pursued for the express purpose of maximising profit. The Church of England warns against such action, in their discussion on research with GM foods, in these words,

While GM developments may be of particular value for developing two-thirds world countries, through enabling the productive use of currently marginal land, there are concerns that this technology should be made available to them in a way that does not increase their dependence and indebtedness to the technologically advanced countries, nor to the powerful multi-national companies on whose products they will have to come to depend. Some imaginative generosity from governments and multinational corporations will be needed to achieve this. Here is an issue on which the Church might well wish to exert influence.

The Church must continue, therefore, to be the voice of the voiceless in an environment, which gives prominence to the one-third world at the expense of the two-third world. It is my hope that a policy framework or memorandum of understanding will emerge from the

conference to guide the work of the Churches in discussions on bioethics and biotechnologies. In the end this is one world, as is echoed by the song writer, Maltbie D.

Babcock:

This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget

That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God

Is the ruler yet.

This is my Father's world: why should my heart be sad?

The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let

The earth be glad!

Thank you.