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Benedict XVI's new friends: Greenpeace and the Socialists

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NCR Today

Pope Benedict XVI today delivered his annual address to diplomats accredited to the Vatican, which is the premier occasion for popes to lay out their geopolitical agenda. In terms of issues, Benedict identified three priorities: defense of the family, religious freedom, and protection of the environment.

From the get-go, the list is reminder that the social and political concerns of the Catholic church, and of this pope, don't fit neatly into any ideological formation. Anyone paying even a modest amount of attention, however, should already know that.

What's more interesting about this morning's speech is the intriguing hint it offers that the politics of the 'culture wars' are being subtly, but surely, redefined.

In the context of the family, Benedict XVI struck the usual notes: marriage as a union between a man and a woman, abortion as a threat to the 'future of humanity.' If things hold to form, that language will be cheered by social conservatives in the West and either ignored or excoriated by liberals.

The twist came when the pontiff identified two developments in the past year he sees as especially encouraging:

- An October decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union banning the commercial patenting of embryonic stem cells.
- A resolution adopted in the same month by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe condemning prenatal selection on the basis of sex.

The fascinating point is that in both cases, political support in Europe for these moves came from the left, not the right. The legal complaint which led to the Court of Justice ban on patenting embryos was brought by the German branch of Greenpeace, while the parliamentary resolution on prenatal selection was introduced by a Swiss Socialist and feminist named Doris Stump.

In other words, Benedict XVI used his showcase political speech to applaud breakthroughs achieved by Greenpeace and the Socialists.

If that doesn't upset the usual paradigm, I'm not quite sure what would. It almost sounds like the beginning of a stand-up routine: "The pope, a Greenpeace activist and a socialist walk into a bar?"

To be sure, Benedict's logic is a bit different from his new friends on the European left. In the case of the ban on stem-cell patents, Greenpeace sees it as a blow against the commercialization of life and in favor of free access to medical research, while for the pope it's a step towards ending the destruction of embryos; Stump supported the resolution on pre-natal selection as a means of fighting discrimination against women, while Benedict sees it as a means of curbing abortion.

Politics, however, notoriously makes strange bedfellows. The bottom line is that in a growing number of new bio-debates, erstwhile enemies find themselves on the same side.

One unintended side effect of today's biotech revolution is to turn the "culture wars" on their head. More often than one might expect, the Catholic church will be aligned with elements of the secular left, both of whom have reservations about these technologies. They'll be facing off against pro-business conservatives, the medical and scientific establishment, as well as libertarians opposed to government regulation on principle.

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For those interested in more background, I laid out the contours of the new biopolitics in my 2009 book *The Future Church*. Here's one relevant section.

Redefining the Culture Wars

The politics of bioethics in the West has historically pitted a permissive left against a restrictive right. That was the dynamic when the front-burner issues were abortion and birth control, and it's still true with many of today's agonizing debates, such as embryonic stem cell research and end-of-life questions.

The primary consequence for the Catholic Church has been to drive it into an ever-tighter alliance with the political right.

The front-line bioethical debates of the future, however, may make today's ideological divisions much less clear-cut, as opposition to the brave new world of biotechnology will stem as much from the secular left as the religious right. This reality is already crystal-clear in Europe, where the use of genetically modified foods has basically been stopped in its tracks by the political left, not the right. Across the range of other looming biotech issues, something similar is afoot, which in the long run may upend the current

marriage of convenience between Catholicism and the political right on the culture wars.

To be sure, there's strong opposition to the biotech revolution from the right, including the emergence of a group of influential intellectuals dubbed "bio-conservatives" who fear that fundamental lines of human dignity are being blurred. Yet the most ferocious criticism of today's biotech developments comes from figures associated with the cultural left.

Jeremy Rifkin, for example, is often aligned with liberal environmental circles; he's served as a personal advisor to Romano Prodi, the left-of-center Prime Minister of Italy. Rifkin is also the acerbic critic of the biotech age, earning him the title, according to *Time* magazine, of "the most hated man in science." On the subject of GMOs, for example, Rifkin has said that they threaten humanity with "a form of annihilation every bit as deadly as nuclear holocaust."

Rifkin acknowledges that the old left/right taxonomy on the culture wars is giving way.

"The biotech era will bring with it a very different constellation of political visions and social forces, just as the industrial era did," Rifkin writes. "The current debate over cloning human embryos" is already loosening the old alliances and categories. It's just the beginning of the new biopolitics."

Leftist environmentalist Bill McKibben is also part of this new biopolitics. On the grounds of protecting harmony with nature, McKibben is deeply skeptical of most aspects of the biotech revolution. He's written that "genetically engineering our children will be the worst choice human beings ever make." Other socially conscious leftists harbor similar reservations. Marcy Darnovsky from the Center for Genetics and Society, along with Tom Athanasiou from EcoEquity, assert that genetic engineering will "allow inequality to be inscribed into the human genome."

On most new biotech issues the Catholic Church will probably side with the opposition, on the grounds of respect for life as well as concern that the ultimate end of such technologies will be to erode human uniqueness. The political consequences of such values, which are obviously central to Catholic anthropology and morality, mean that bishops and pro-life activists may increasingly find themselves accompanied by unaccustomed allies from the secular left, who will have to learn anew to think of Catholicism as a friend as well as a foe.

In the coming biopolitics, the pro-life stance of Roman Catholicism may thus locate the church within a new trans-ideological constellation, one defined by profound mutations, so to speak, in the political DNA of the West. In what might come to be regarded as one of the primary miracles of genetic science, the Church and at least some elements of the left may once again find themselves on speaking terms.

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