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Right and left join forces to oppose brave new world of biotechnology

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

For some time, the politics of bioethics in the West has fueled deep ideological polarization between a permissive left and a restrictive right. That was the dynamic when the front-burner issues were abortion and birth control, and it's still true of today's most agonizing debates, such as embryonic stem cell research and end-of-life questions such as those surrounding the Terry Schiavo case in Florida.

On every one of those issues, the knee-jerk response of the left is to let people make their own decisions, while that of the right is to defend life. This fault line forms the core of today's "culture wars."

The primary consequence for the Catholic church has been to drive it into an ever-tighter alliance with the political right, a trend clearly in evidence during the 2004 presidential elections in the United States. This is notoriously frustrating for "seamless garment" Catholics, who insist that if you take into view the full range of the church's moral and social teaching, it cannot be subsumed into any secular ideological formation.

But what if we project forward 10 to 20 years, trying to anticipate what the front-line bioethical debates will be then? Looking at what's happening in the biological sciences, such questions may include cloning, life-extension treatments, the creation of transgenic entities such as chimeras, the use of genetic technology to "engineer" offspring with desirable intellectual and physical capacities, and the widespread use of genetically modified foods.

If that's the future, one surprising consequence is that today's ideological divisions may become much less clear-cut, as opposition to the brave new world of biotechnology will stem as much from the left as the 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. The same phenomenon is in evidence in the Catholic church, where the most vehement opposition to GMOs has come from the bishops' conferences of the developing world, often in tandem with theologians and members of religious communities who would generally be considered "liberal" on most political matters.

Several Filipino bishops, for example, including Dinualdo Gutierrez of Marbel, have been outspoken in their criticism of GMOs. In 2002, fourteen Brazilian bishops condemned the cultivation and consumption of GMOs, and in the same year the Catholic Bishops of South Africa said, "It is morally irresponsible to produce and market genetically modified food."

Across the range of other looming bioethical issues, something similar is afoot.

To be sure, there's also strong opposition to the biotech revolution from the right, including the emergence of a group of influential intellectuals dubbed "bio-conservatives," concerned that fundamental lines of human dignity are being blurred. Such figures include Leon Kass, former chair of the President's Council on Bioethics, and Francis Fukuyama, who has warned that developments in biotechnology threaten to "alter human nature and thereby move us into a 'post-human' stage of history." Fukuyama too sits on the President's Council on Bioethics, which, under President George W. Bush, has been something of a forum for bio-conservative thought, often with a strong Catholic flavor.

Yet some of the most ferocious criticism of today's developments comes from figures more 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. Yet he's also perhaps the leading critic of the biotech age, earning him the title, according to *Time* magazine, of "the most hated man in science."

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"The biotech era will bring with it a very different constellation of political visions and social forces, just as the industrial era did," Rifkin has written. "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, for example, 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."

Admittedly, left and right typically approach biotech issues from different points of departure -- concern for the environment on the left, a strong defense of the sanctity of human life on the right. Yet the future of bioethics suggests these two forces may, increasingly, meet in the middle.

On these new biotech issues, the Catholic church is almost certain to side largely with the opposition, on the grounds of respect for human dignity, as well as concern that the ultimate end of such technologies will be to erode human uniqueness.

Richard Doerflinger, deputy director of pro-life activities for the U.S. bishops' conference, recently made this point with respect to the impact of the creation of "chimeras," or organisms which carry genes from more than one source -- such as mice injected with human brain cells in order to study the pathology of diseases such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's.

"Some would like to render the sanctity of human life technologically obsolete by demonstrating that species membership is fungible," Doerflinger said. "If so, then the idea of natural law based on a fixed human nature is over. You'd have to come up with some other basis for rights, like sentience."

Doerflinger called that prospect a "real threat, a real motivation on the part of some," and hence "something worth worrying about."

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 some unaccustomed allies from the secular left, who will have to learn anew to think of Catholicism as a friend as well as a foe.

Of course, not everyone on the left thinks this way. Ronald Bailey, for example, has written a book called *Liberation Biology*, deliberately comparing his defense of the biotech revolution to the liberation theology movement. Both, he believes are about liberating people from oppression -- poverty, in the case of liberation theology, and the physical limits of nature with developments in bio-technology. Yet there's also a strong case for biotech on the right, especially from pro-business conservatives linked to major biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies. That influence is one reason, for example, that the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See has been pressing the Vatican to adopt a positive stance on GMOs.

The point is that new bioethical debates often defy traditional ideological categories.

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

Editor's Note: In the Feb. 16 issue of NCR (available on

NCRonline.org Feb. 13),

John Allen writes about the ethical debate over chimeras in an article titled "Human, animal mix."

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