

Some (Unedited) Reflections on the October 25-27, 1996 Meeting - The Patenting of Biological Materials

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We usually end our bishops' dialog the final morning by trying to define common ground. Then we proceed to put together a little publication based on what the group agrees to. Usually it turns out that there is more common ground than would have been suspected at the beginning. I think that this has happened in this dialog --- conversation may be a better word.

I know I've shifted my views on gene patenting to some extent. I gather from others that they have altered their view as well. I entered the discussion feeling that it wasn't a terribly significant issue and now, after participating in the conversation and hearing others views, I realize that there are very important issues to be considered. I don't think I've moved from my position that gene patenting in itself is an instrumentality that's hardly neutral and that use is important. But I think that there are very important issues embedded in it.

These are just some things that occurred to me as a consensus statements of the group, although I don't propose these for further debate, rather for reflection. I'd like to try to end these conversations on a positive note --- not emphasizing where we disagree but where we agree.

The first one stated by Sister Virginia (Kampwerth) yesterday is that knowledge is good. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. The question is to what use knowledge is put. The area where the knowledge is used could become problematical.

The second point is that biotechnology is as likely to confer great power for good as for ill. It will probably be used for good *and* for ill. That is a significant statement because some people, some parties to this discussion, might take an extreme view one way or another. It is very important to insist on the morally ambiguous nature of bio-technology. That in its way brings everybody into the discussion.

The third point is that, while rapid advances in genetic science and technology *may* be inevitable, people must continue seeking ways to bring the light of our moral traditions to bear upon it. I wouldn't say it remains under judgment because I don't know whether we're in a position to render judgment to anyone but ourselves. Certainly we must try to continue giving the gift of the Christian Tradition to this emerging set of technology.

The fourth point is: ownership is not a helpful way of describing humanity's relationship with God. Dominion has been suggested. That perhaps represents an improvement.

Fifth, the patenting of genetic information may be useful in developing new pharmaceuticals. Under no circumstances may individual human beings be patented. Other uses of gene patenting should be approached with caution. This is kind of a minimalist statement; perhaps we could improve on it.

Sixth, the science, business and religious communities can benefit from a mutual exchange of views on gene patenting and other issues related to the development of human genetics. If we could even get widespread agreement on this last one we would have made a major step forward. That the scientific, religious and business communities all have things to say about this, and that there may be benefit in exchanging their views, is a rather basic understanding of the situation.

One last general comment: I emphasize that I have no fundamental disagreement with essayist Ben Mitchell on these issues. I appreciate the fact that he's raised the questions that he has raised. We would probably disagree on the specifics of gene patenting even at this point, but not on our general moral approach to it. And I do want to end where he ended. I made the remark to our gene patenting dialog group earlier this week that, while religious communities must sometimes issue judgments on things, in order to be true to itself, what it mostly does is bring a message of faith and hope to the dialog, to the discussion. We would say in the final analysis of bio-technology that we have faith that the development of these technologies which has landed in our laps, will eventually contribute to the human welfare as long as we are vigilant to bring to bear what we know from Revelation and from reason about these matters.