

God, Ethics and the Human Genome

1. In February 2006, Synod debated a motion from the Diocese of Guildford, concerned with the patenting of the human genome. The debate acknowledged the complexity of the issues and the profound theological questions generated by the whole field of genetic research. Following amendment, the motion was carried, that,

This Synod, in the light of the deep concerns expressed in this debate, ask the Mission and Public Affairs Council to explore the theological, ethical and legal implications of patenting of the human genome and bring a report to this Synod by February 2007.

2. On behalf of the MPA Council, The Revd Mark Bratton convened a working group whose members brought expertise in all the disciplines mentioned in the motion, and who represented different approaches to the questions. In addition, Dr Anna Thomas Betts, from the MPA Council, and Canon John Ashe, who had moved the original motion on behalf of the Diocese of Guildford, contributed to the group's meetings.
3. During the Synod debate itself, it was acknowledged that the February 2007 deadline was optimistic, and so it has proved. The process of drafting, critiquing and rewriting chapters took much longer than anticipated. Nevertheless, the group's work quickly showed that new ground was being broken, especially in terms of the dialogue between Christian theology and other disciplines, and that the work deserved a wide audience. This led to a publishing contract with Church House Publishing, and the attractive book which Synod members will have received with their mailing (GSMisc917) entitled, *God, Ethics and the Human Genome*.
4. The book constitutes the MPA Council's report to Synod on this vitally important ethical subject. This short paper introduces the main points which the book makes.
5. ***The role of Scripture*** – the role of Scripture is fundamental, but problematic, to the task of producing and authentically Christian social ethics. Dilemmas in social and medical ethics cannot usually be resolved by appeal to scriptural texts alone. Yet a biblically-formed and informed Christian anthropology is vital to the task of understanding the nature of being human, the meaning of healing and wholeness, and within that context, the very 'ends' of medicine. Advances in human genome science have put all these in issue.
6. ***The implications of an authentically Christian understanding of 'the human'*** – our creaturehood before God compels us to strongly resist forces which seek to assimilate humans to, or encourage humans to take flight from, the natural, social, political and

historical orders of which we are inescapably a part. The ‘whole’ human person can neither be reduced to her ‘sub-personal’ genetic constituents, nor abstracted from his genetic solidarity with and within the created order.

7. ***The demands of Christian theological integrity*** –the Church has a missionary vocation – for which the Anglican Church is well-suited – from its own theological resources to persuade non-Christian but ethically-attentive, people to do the good and right thing. In particular, there is scope for fruitful conversation between Christian theology and philosophical medical ethics about the ethical implications of human genome science which neither compromises Christian theological integrity nor lapses into neurotic concern for Christian distinctiveness.
8. ***The importance of scientific literacy*** – a responsible Christian ethics can only emerge from obtaining, and thoroughly engaging with, growing knowledge of human genetic science. The scientific community forms an integral part of society and scientific work occurs within a moral and political context. The progress of scientific research, the clinical applications of that research and issues of social justice are inextricably linked.
9. ***The place of technology*** – Perceptions of the role of technology are profoundly shaped by the logic of influential narratives, whether the Christian narrative of ‘gift’ and ‘destiny’ or the modernist narrative of ‘will’ and ‘control’. Which narrative prevails will have profound implications for law and public policy
10. ***The value-laden-ness of law and public policy*** – The formulation of law and public policy is heavily value-laden, rather than ethically neutral. Patents form part of a commercial ecology which is vital to scientific research, yet dangerous if purely commercial considerations dictate the criteria for patentability, e.g. the linguistic manipulation of patentability criteria to extend patent protection to human genome sequences.
11. This book is intended to encourage and challenge readers to aspire to the scientific, ethical and theological literacy required to contribute to thoughtful public debate on a topic which touches upon the very meaning of ‘being human’.
12. The Mission and Public Affairs Council commends *God, Ethics and the Human Genome* to members of Synod, and to the church at large. We hope that it will be widely used in parishes, deaneries and dioceses.

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