

Genetic Engineering

Late last month we received the following thoughts from Ed Schroeder on the intersection of theology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

I know little about genetic engineering, but I must confess that my scientist's eye is skeptical of the factual claims in the anti-GMO source that Ed cites. (I also take issue with Ed's implications about Einstein, much of whose work quickly gained widespread acceptance among his peers even if it wasn't held to the same standards prepublication peer review that are in place today.)

I am nonetheless intrigued by Ed's theological arguments, and I expect many of you will be as well. His piece is certainly a conversation starter—as he says in his subtitle, a collection of “thoughts for discussion.”

Should these theological thoughts inspire you to respond in kind, please do. We look forward to hearing from you and considering your response for publication in this space sometime soon.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

G-O-D and G-M-O Engineering

A once-upon-a-time farm boy's thoughts for discussion

The conclusion of these reflections on my part replaces the 'and' above with a 'vs.': G-O-D vs. G-M-O engineering. Better

expressed by reversing the nouns: Genetic engineering is contrary to the Creator's intention for the welfare of creation. Yea or nay on that assertion is what ought to be in the mix with today's GMO debate.

1. Why yea? Genetic engineering's net result damages creation. Way back at the Biblical beginning, humans as God-reflectors were called to nourish/care for creation—both the human creatures and the other ones as well. Damage or destroy is the opposite. The Creator opposes such action. "Destroyer" is the Biblical metaphor for God's opponent in creation.
2. A hint of such damage, at least—danger, for sure—is already in two key terms at the center of the operation. Insecticide and its accompanying term, herbicide. The "-cide" is the Latin word for kill. Killing is dicey business. Initially, the opposite of creating. Can killing ever be creative of anything? Yes, I do swat the mosquito that lands on my arm. But killing poses a deeper issue.
3. Killing is a term that the Creator has reserved for himself. "No god except me: I kill and I make alive. There is none that can deliver out of my hand." (Deut. 32:39) So goes the standard translation of the final sentence. Better translation, I propose, is: "No one should take that task out of my hand." That is, "unless I authorize it." And there is Biblical support for such authorization in some places.
4. The consequence of that exclusive turf-claim is the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," with the accent on the THOU. "It's my turf, not yours. I arrange the balance between killing and making alive in creation. Yes, a balance so intricate, mysterious, arcane, so micro- and macro- complex that you have to be God, not only to see how it all works, but especially to manage it. So don't go

there. It's beyond your competence. I've got it covered. You might go there to peek—but on tiptoe, remembering your limited faculties as creature not creator. Don't go there to start mucking around. You can only mess it up with '—cidal' consequences for everybody in the mix." If killing ("—cide" work) is ever to be carried out by humans at the foundational mysteries of existence, GMO engineers included, they need to find divine authorization for that work. Where is it?

5. The claim for some sort of "divine" authorization for GMO engineers (we are doing good, doing the right thing) is linked to the claim that GMOs increase worldwide food production to feed the starving millions, now billions. Data to verify that claim are dicey. [See #6 below.] A recent publication from OXFAM, an organization dedicated to the same world-feeding goals, says that the increase in worldwide food production since the introduction of GMO—and its spread worldwide—is minimal, and that "old-fashioned" ways of agriculture have themselves been pushing the food production curve constantly up and up, possibly even at a faster rate. How you crunch the numbers is dicey too.
6. Then comes the damage—to the soil, to the ecosystem, and finally to people. Studies on this item—all of which claim to be scientific—are as conflicted as are politics in the USA today. Here theology intersects with science in a new way. Not in the way we've become accustomed: faith in God and "faith" in science in conflict. Nowadays faith in science is itself polytheistic. Conflict inside the house of science. Especially in the GMO debate—scientists contradict scientists. What does "peer review" mean when peers disagree? [So much for peerage!] You have to choose which science/whose science you're going to believe in. [There is now a "Mars Hill" of many differing science-

altars, in whose midst I can imagine St. Paul saying again, "There's still one deity unknown here on this Areopagus."]

7. I have looked at some of the offerings at these altars. Their number is legion. Just the other day I learned of the work of now-retired agriculture prof Don Huber from Purdue University. Some in the GMO business dismiss his work and word as idiosyncratic and unreliable. Could be. But then, so was Einstein. Who did peer-review of his stuff? So you have to pick and choose which voice seems to make the best sense. And above all, which voice has no vested interest, personal benefit (patent or submerged), coming from what he or she presents. Canadian Lutheran pastor Larry Denef, buddy from grad school days in Germany way back when, alerted me to Huber, who does not present himself as an Einstein. He has peers who agree and peers who don't.

8. Here's the article Larry sent to me. Check it out for yourself._____

["Problems with Glyphosate."](#)

[Editor's note: This links to a story on mercola.com, an alternative-medicine website that has been criticized by the mainstream scientific community. [The Wikipedia entry for the site's founder](#) gives a sense of the skepticism with which his site has been met.]

9. One of the strangest conundrums in the GMO business is that the supposed beneficiaries—the farmers, the starving masses—have not risen en masse to sing the praises of GMOs. That's true of four of my Schroeder clan who are farmers "back at the ranch." And also from folks intended to be blessed with more food in countries abroad. Why is this? Are they benighted, unable to see the blessings of their benefactor?

10. So why don't they "just say no"? For some it's almost impossible. African and South American voices we've heard say that. They talk about "new slavery." And we've heard similar voices from here at home. "Right now we're not sure where we can even go to get 'old-fashioned' corn seed," is what one Schroeder nephew tells me. Which brings up the word monopoly and the world of economics.
11. Monopoly in the world of economics is one of the three forms of the demonization of God's economic order. I learned that from my teacher Elert. Monopoly is contra-Creator. Two other forms are luxury and slavery. All demonic, that means destructive, of the economic order. All three are in the mix in this issue. A few years ago I translated the chapter in Elert's ethics on economics. Posted it as a Thursday Theology offering, in two parts. You can find them here:<https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur062410.shtml> and <https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur070110.shtml>
12. The first of these two has a reference to an early ThTh posting, #548 from December 2008, wherein these words of Elert appear at the very end of one of his books: "But this is really THE creation, God's creation where God's structures when broken do indeed bring recompense. These are the fundamental relationships of man and woman, people and nations, governments and law, and also a wholesome pattern of economic life. The tragedy of our time is bankruptcy of the human soul, evoked by the absolutizing of the last of these relationships, economics. The consequence is scant concern for all the others. For this reason it is only the empty eyes of "entseelter Menschen" [humans with no more soul] that stare at us when we seek to solve every economic crisis. The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape."

13. "The tragedy of our time . . . absolutizing economics."
"God's creation, God's structures, when broken, do indeed bring recompense." Is that daily life today—or what? Also in the GMO world? And the concluding sentence too? "The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape." Elert wrote those words in 1932.
14. GMO engineering is busy "changing structures," the structures at the foundation (so far as we know today) of life on our planet. That's playing with fire. Worse than that. Instead of "playing God," it's "playing" with the hidden God. Which is suicide. [There's that "-cide" word again.] Why sui-(self)-cide? "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the (hidden) living God." (Hebrews 10:31)
15. Genetic engineers are deeply involved in doing creation theology. Is it good theology? Good enough? If so, where is the evidence? What are the "sufficient grounds" for that theology? That's what we ought to be talking about in the GMO kerfuffle. So it seems to me. And so far, the conclusion to that questioning appears clear to me.

Is Jesus' own prayer, "Father, forgive them; they know now what they do," appropriate here? For them? For me? In my case it's been so before.