

## ETHICAL ISSUES AND GMO'S

Speaking from the perspective of the faith communities, I want to state at the outset that we are not "flat-earthers"! We recognize the advances and considerable benefits brought to humankind through technological and scientific developments.

I have a good friend who is a most competent and responsible farmer in East Griqualand. On seeing him recently he was at pains to tell me that he is planting BT maize. He said the alternative is to use a horribly toxic poison and the BT maize is, for him, the preferable choice.

We recognize the benefits and advances that can be made from the biotech industry. However, genetic engineering is a totally different order from selective breeding and I do not find that people in the biotech industry are honest in clearly distinguishing between the two. I find this crucial. With genetic engineering we are altering the basic structure of life. In so doing, we need to be clear about the consequences.

We do not find that this is happening with genetic engineering. The precautionary principle is not being applied. It may well make it easier for my farming friend to plant BT maize but are there any harmful consequences for human consumption? We may well be assured that there are no health risks, but that has not been proven. Tests have not been made on humans. We cannot monitor the position because GM maize is not labeled. Tests that have been done on rats are grounds for considerable disquiet. Stories of deleterious effects on cows abound – what is the position regarding human consumption?

With this as background, I express my grave concern regarding genetically modified foods on three grounds;

1. Since we are altering the basic structure of life, it is essential that the precautionary principle be applied. Food should be released for human consumption until the consequences are fully known.
2. Through genetic engineering multi-national seed companies are seeking to gain control of the supply of food. The planting of hybridized seed and GMO seed may well benefit "agribusiness". However, it could prove disastrous for the subsistence farmer. We all know that in Africa subsistence farmers have traditionally saved seed from one year to the next and, in times of drought and difficulties, have shared their seed with the community. To become indebted to corporate seed companies could prove disastrous for food security in Africa. It could also prove disastrous if we rely on a few types of maize if, for example, that particular type is infected. The potato famine of Ireland should be a stark reminder to us to of the need to maintain diversity.

Of particular concern in the GMO field would be the introduction of the Terminator Gene. One shudders to think of the consequences to the Cape Floral Kingdom as one example, if the Terminator Gene were to cross pollinate

From the Faith Communities' perspective there are huge justice and moral issues involved with the contemporary trend towards monopolistic practices. This includes the whole issue of the patenting of Life, which we are finding to be immoral. We believe that the control of food and seed needs to be in the hands of the people and not held by a few multinational corporations whose allegiance is to their share-holders and not the poor of the world.

3. We find it quite extraordinary, and again verging on the immoral, that the seed companies have resisted labeling. We have a democratic right to know what we are eating and to have a choice. It should go without saying that GM food needs to be labeled so that we have the right of choice.

Further to this we, the public, have not asked for genetically modified food. It has been foisted on us by the multinationals. The argument may well be that through GM food "agribusiness" is able to produce food at a lower cost. This, it could be said, is the "free market" and market prices will prevail. It is high time to recognize that life is not and should not be dependent on economic considerations only. What are the consequences for biodiversity, for humans, for animals, for the variety of plants, and for life itself of the use of genetically modified food? But I ask this question not just with regard to GMOs, but to every aspect of our environment. The Millennium Ecological Assessment (MEA) has already clearly shown that we are plundering natural resources to such an extent that the planet can no longer sustain its natural life support systems. We are increasingly realizing, with the growing awareness of climate change, that sole reliance on economic considerations could prove disastrous to life on earth. We have to take into consideration the impact of technological developments on the poor and on the natural environment. At present our consideration seems to be for the benefit of investors.

I have said that we do not wish to be seen as “flat-earthers” but when it comes to GMO’s I have found a deep concern among Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims alike. We believe that we need to be assured that we are not having unleashed on us a further “advance” that could prove disastrous to the life of our children and to life on planet earth.

I end with the following extracts from Larry L. Rasmussen’s book Earth Community Earth Ethics –

*If the great new fact of our time is that cumulative human activity has the power to affect all life in fundamental and unprecedented ways, then **what might and ought to be** is precisely what needs to be taken into account. This means the ascendancy of ethics in our era, as an utterly practical affair. How **ought** we to live, and what **ought** we **do** in view of a fundamentally changed human relationship to earth, a relationship we only partially comprehend?*

*Differently said, the radical increase in cumulative human power over this century means a new account of responsibility. It requires moralities and ways of life that extend responsibility to include everything that has life and is necessary to life. Sustainable ways of life, and living into them, await us as necessities that must come to pass.*

*Using the planet as a laboratory for massive, uncontrolled trial-and-error experiments – this is our present case – is hazardous. “We are safe, well ventilated, and incubated,” Lewis Thomas says, “provided we can avoid technologies that might fiddle with the ozone, or shift the levels of carbon dioxide.” It may be hard “to feel affection for something as totally impersonal as the atmosphere, and yet there it is, as much a part and product of life as wine and bread.”*

*In conclusion, Charles Marsh apparently got it right in a best-seller published a century and a quarter ago. Marsh, an oddball naturalist because he wrote of relationships instead of organisms, said this in 1874:*

*‘Man is dealing with dangerous weapon whenever he interferes with arrangements pre-established by a power higher than his own. The equation of animal and vegetable life is too complicated a problem for human intelligence to solve, and we can never know how wide a circle of disturbance we produce in the harmonies of nature when we throw the smallest pebble into the ocean of organic being.’*

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Bishop Geoff Davies

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