Genes Eugenics and the Future of Persons: An international symposium on disability and the new genetics

In May 2005 the Centre hosted an international symposium on genetics and disability. The symposium drew together a multidisciplinary team of participants from Britain, Europe and the United States to reflect on the significance of genetic technology for the lives of people with disabilities and for our understanding of what it means to be human and to live humanly.

Brief summary

Recent development in genetic technology asks of us new and deeply challenging questions with regard to our understanding of personhood and the essence of humanness. Such technology promises the eradication of certain forms of disease and disability, while simultaneously opening the way to shaping our unborn children into our own image of beauty and perfection by removing their every spot, blemish and disability. In the future, parents need not worry about disability or "ugliness"; now we can fix the broken places and save our children and ourselves from the pain of suffering, differentness and exclusion. At last, human beings have the technology to overcome disease and disability and create a society within which no one need suffer from unnecessary disabling conditions.

Yet a haunting question remains: *do we really want a world without disability?* What would a society without people who have disabilities *really* be like? Would we be better people if we existed in such a society? What price would we have to pay for such a Utopia and who would pay it? Indeed, what would it mean to be a human made in the image of God within a world in which people have no more sickness, disability or genetically based suffering? What would a world without the experience of Down's syndrome mean for our understanding of being human? More worryingly, once we have eradicated genetic disability who will come next on the repair list? The symposium explored these issues within a multidisciplinary context.

Key points which were addressed by the symposium included:

- What does the new genetics suggest that people are for?
- What effects result from the promise of being able to create children in our own image?
- What are the implications of this for people with disabilities?
- What is the moral, social and theological significance of genetic technology?
- What does it mean to be human and to live humanly in a world which takes the elimination of foetuses on the basis of disability to be morally appropriate?
- Is there an inherent connection between genetic technology and eugenics? If yes, how should we understand that connection and respond to it? If no, how do we conceive of the boundary?
- What new light does the new genetics shed on our understanding of the image of God and the sanctity of human life?
- How does public policy relate to the implementation of genetic technology?

The proceedings from the symposium will be published in a forthcoming book which will be published by T&T Clarke in 2007. (Details to come)

Conference participants

- Professor John Swinton, Practical Theology and Pastoral Care, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK.
- Dr Brian Brock, Practical and Moral Theology, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK.
- Dr. Bernd Wannenwetsch, University Lecturer in Ethics, Oxford University, UK
- Dr Amy Laura Hall, Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics, Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, USA
- Professor Hans Reinders, Willem van der Bergh Professor of Ethics and Mental Disability, Vrije Universiteit, Netherlands
- Dr Robert Song, Senior Lecturer in Christian Ethics, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Durham, UK.
- Professor Walter Doerfler, Institut für Klinische und Molekulare Virologie, Germany.
- Pfrn. Martina Holder-Franz, Multenrain, Switzerland
- Dr. Brent Waters, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Chicago, USA
- Dr. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, President, Institute on Biotechnology and the Human Future, Chicago, USA
- Dr Jeffrey Bishop, Associate Professor, Southwest Medical School, The University of Texas. USA
- Dr. Christopher Newell, School of Medicine, University of Tasmania, Australia.
- Dr Sheila A Simpson, Associate Specialist /Senior Lecturer in Clinical Genetics, Clinical Genetics Centre, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK
- Dr. Blair Smith (M.D.) Department of General Practice & Primary Care University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

This is the commencement of a unique initiative which will bring together experts from a wide range of disciplines and contexts to explore a subject which is of great importance socio-economically, politically and theologically.

Page last modified: Thursday, 19-Apr-2007 18:58:12 BST

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