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Clergymen Ask Ban on Efforts To Alter Genes

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Religious leaders ranging from the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church to the Rev. Jerry Falwell are asking scientists never to conduct experiments to alter human heredity.

A resolution signed by James T. Draper Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Convention; James W. Malone, the director of the National Council of Churches; 22 Roman Catholic bishops and the heads of the Lutheran and United Methodist churches, among numerous others, states that efforts to engineer specific traits should not be attempted.

"Once we decide to begin the process of human genetic engineering, there is really no logical place to stop," said Jeremy Rifkin, an author who organized the coalition. "If diabetes, sickle cell anemia and cancer are to be cured by altering genetic makeup of an individual, why not proceed to other 'disorders': myopia, color blindness, left-handedness?"

The resolution, which has already begun to stir controversy, calls for some action to prohibit genetic engineering that would alter the human "germ line," or basic set of genes.

Biologists criticized the measure as overly broad and probably not carefully considered by the clergy. In fact, the comments of some of the signers appeared to conflict with the language of the resolution.

Alex Capron, formerly the executive director of the President's Commission on Bioethics, called the statement "misguided and irresponsible. I would be concerned that the clergy have been misled into adding their names and prestige to something that amounts to crying fire in a crowded theater. The statement is alarmist in tone and highly rhetorical.

"It lumps together things that are near at hand and important with those things much further away and about which we should proceed cautiously," Capron said. "The statement could help derail and damage a process that is already yielding something of value."

"There is not an imminent danger" of engineering human development, said Nobel laureate David Baltimore of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It will be many years before we can even consider doing these things.

"What really bothers me, though, is that the signers of the resolution seem happy to subject future children to torture, deformity and idiocy. What is a group of clergy doing

taking that position?" Baltimore asked. "I can't believe they have taken into account the suffering of those people."

Baltimore added, "All that being said, I agree on technical grounds with what they have to say in general," but he said he could not accept an absolute statement of prohibition on gene engineering work. He favors a commission to monitor the development of the science.

Techniques to alter defective human genes are years, or even decades, away. But virtually all large universities and other major biological centers are engaged in research that might ultimately be useful in gene therapy.

The resolution, which seeks to prohibit all human gene engineering, including both the "improving" of the race and curing genetic diseases, has about 75 signers, most of them religious leaders. The resolution raises "the possibility of altering the human species . . . and irreversibly altering the composition of the gene pool for all future generations of human life"

It states that no individual or group can claim the right to make such decisions on behalf of the rest of the species. Rifkin said that the clergy are concerned about eugenics and the difficulty of halting the artificial improvement of the human species if it is ever begun.

Rifkin is the author of, among other books, "Entropy: A New World View," published in 1980. The book deals with Newton's second law of thermodynamics, the change of energy from usable to unusable forms.

Comments of some of the religious leaders indicate that at least some may not agree with the resolution as it is worded.

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, head of the Rabbinical Assembly, the international organization of conservative rabbis, said, "Most religious people are conscious about tampering with God's creation. It must be very carefully circumscribed." But he added that if there were work that could be of "direct known benefit to some living human being I wouldn't object to that work Curing a known disease in a direct way like that would outweigh other considerations."

Similarly, Cal Thomas, spokesman for the Moral Majority, said that his group would not object to the cure of disease done by gene engineering, such as the elimination of Tay Sachs disease or cancer.

But, he said, "we do believe strong and irreversible restrictions need to be placed on the gene engineering procedures." He suggested a federal gene commission or something like it would have to be established to control the technology.

Bishop John M. Allin, head of the Episcopal Church in America, said, "The resolution is one way of encouraging the broad and deep discussion that the nation must undertake for

quality public policy. It is especially significant that this issue has drawn such strong and broad-based response from the religious community. Clearly this is not just the church saying no to the scientists or to new technology. It is the churches saying, let us take this opportunity . . . to acknowledge that decisions that affect life itself so drastically need to be taken in the whole human community."

The Rev. James T. Draper Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which with 13.6 million members is the second largest denomination in America after Roman Catholics, said gene engineering "is just an area man doesn't need to get into It's just not a proper thing." He said diseases should be cured by conventional medical means, not by engineering genes. "We just shouldn't do it," he said.

But Joe Buonomo, president of the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States, said that gene engineering is part of an important scientific effort to learn about the causes of mental retardation. He said genetic research already has led to early diagnosis and, in some cases, treatment of disorders.

He said it is now possible to alter the damaged chromosome that causes Down's syndrome, the most frequent cause of mental retardation, though practical use of the technology may be some years away.

A spokesman said that the association opposes any restriction on science that might stop research into cures for retardation. (ITEM 123)June 9, 1983, Thursday, Final Edition(ITEM 127)An article yesterday about religious leaders asking for a ban on human gene engineering incorrectly identified James W. Malone. He is vice president of the U.S. Catholic Conference. Bishop A. James Armstrong is president of the National Council of Churches. Both signed the resolution on genetic engineering.

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