

Playing God

I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety. . . For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

– Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-24, M2SV

The question of whether we have arrived at a crossroads of “a world of made and a world of born” is beautifully put. One recalls that the very word *nature*, kin to *nativity* and *natal*, means nothing but endless birth. However, since I have agreed to respond as a Protestant theologian, let me say that the terms of the question suggest a dualism foreign to all biblical traditions. Since nature is understood as creation, it is all, in some sense, “made.” Our mythology rotates around a God who creates creatures, who participates in the creative process; the earth and the sea are invited to “bring forth” those who will live within them; and the human earthlings (*adamah*, from *adam*, earth) are called “in the image of God” because we cocreate in our linguistically enhanced sense, that is, by “the word.” One can, as I and many other theologians do, free that notion of creation from its classical connotation of an omnipotent, anthropomorphic creator making “His” anthropocentric universe “from nothing.” But I think Christian and Jewish theologies will not be able to draw any clear division between the made and the born, whether divine or cultural construction is meant: ecotheologies in these traditions will need to draw the line not between the natural and the constructed, but between the responsibly and the irresponsibly constructed. Indeed, Christian theologies which emphasize the pristinely “natural” or “natural law” usually do so in order to vilify homosexuality and abortion.

For us the progressive path toward an earth-grounded spirituality will lie in deconstructing the nature/culture binary (the deleterious effects of its Christian forms), not in romantically “returning to nature.” So if you think that Christendom is the source of the problem—where else did technoscience get its aggressive confidence in its own universal truth, its drive to “dominion over the earth”?—I might not disagree. But if that means you think the solution to the Western colonization of nature is to eliminate biblical metaphors, then of course you need read no further. My strategy must be to work within the myth, which presumes some human creative privilege within a nature understood as already created and creative, and to find its openings, its leaks, its porosities, and contradictions—the places where, for instance, it hints at the universal incarnation of the spirit in the flesh, and thus of the solidarity of all flesh, “members one of another.” My strategy is to use our indubitable privi-



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lege finally—for God’s sake—for the sake of the whole of life. Moreover, there is perhaps some tactical advantage in some of us claiming the biblical high ground, with its ancient tradition of protest against the commodification of life, to resist much of what a profit-driven biotechnology has made.

As a representative of Protestant theology, however, I can’t enter the discussion without first addressing a bit of bad theology used routinely by progressives, environmentalists, and other well-intended critics of irresponsible technoscience. This is the theology posted in the title of Michael Pollan’s otherwise superb, indeed indispensable, essay in the *New York Times Magazine* exposing Monsanto’s bioengineering of agriculture: “Playing God in the Garden.” It is the theology assumed by the Prince of Wales, a passionate advocate of organic techniques, when he vowed that he would never eat or serve the fruits of a technology that “takes mankind into realms that belong to God and to God alone.” “Playing God” seems to be the most charged public metaphor available for marking a point of transgression, a boundary of no return, an arrogance which inspires a kind of negative awe, a horror at some new level of Promethean hubris, some startling front in the technological colonization of human and other natures. It suggests that technoscience is replaying the myth of Eden, breaking the rules, violating a



virginal paradise of nature, or perhaps defiling some final frontier of natural purity—such as its genetic integrity—threatening to get us all in big trouble (again?). It is because I am deeply concerned with that nature that I want to resist the bad theological tactics whereby we seek to protect it. They can only backfire.

Like “O God!”, the metaphor of “playing God” is used by both nontheists and theists for its expletive force as well as its invocation of an absolute limit. Mainstream religious groups have used the concept with deeper theological consistency, as in the 1980 letter by Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic spokespersons warning President Carter against the attempt to “correct” our mental and social structures genetically. As theologian Ted Peters says in his book *Playing God*, at stake is the prescription of a “new commandment, ‘Thou shalt not play God.’” Of course the phrase has also served conservative moral ends, as in Christian opposition to such low-tech medical interventions as abortion and euthanasia.

Temporarily, however, my argument is not with the politics but with the theology. It implies an absolute boundary between the human and the divine, a boundary that we can and do transgress. This is paradoxical: God is usually depicted as the omnipotent creator; yet we have been granted the capacity to violate the creation (enough rope to hang ourselves with). “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof!” exclaims the psalmist. But I don’t think s/he had in mind the assignation of divine property rights implied by our capitalist discourse about “realms that belong to God.” The phrase carries with it the implication not only that we are trespassing on God’s property but that we are misappropriating divine prerogatives: whether of life and death or of genetic design. This implies that in some sense such interventions indeed imitate the work of God the creator. In the tradition of Protestant dissent against prior forms of Christianity, I lodge a double theological protest: against the twin assumptions that God can be separated from the universe and that God is a transcendent agent who intervenes at will. This is the omnipotent God of classical theism, and to be sure this is the God to which the majority of Christians have been habituated. But “He” represents only one possible interpretation of scripture; it is an interpretation of scripture which many Christians do not believe best serves the interests of responsible stewardship of the creation or the sustainability of our life practices.

But even if one holds to such a deity, as Peters more or less does, the phrase “playing God” inscribes a nonbiblical taboo against human technology. “Science in the service of beneficence ought not to be intimidated by a ‘No Trespassing’ sign that says, ‘Thou shalt not play God.’” (*Playing God: Genetic Determination and Human Freedom*) How to determine “beneficence” is another matter altogether.

If we are going to talk about God (which I think Christians should learn to do as sparingly as did Jesus, who preferred “realm of God” or “kingdom of heaven”), then this God of “thou shalt not play God” doesn’t wash. Getting human *is* ‘playing God.’ But play knows that it plays: it respects its own limits not by setting rigid boundaries, but by

transgressing creatively, lightly, knowingly. Play only turns sinister when it ceases to take its own power playfully—and begins to stake out brutally serious claims. The degree to which science hardened into reductionist determinisms may reflect the degree to which it had to defend itself against theocratic suppression in its formative phases. That reductionism is beginning to loosen up in the theoretical sciences, at least as concerns quantum mechanics, chaos, complexity, and string theory.

Thus there is nothing more promising for the generation of an earth-grounded spirituality than its developing interchange with scientific cosmology. Perhaps this very interchange gives us the toehold we need for more precisely honed ethical challenges than “don’t play God.” Perhaps, indeed, it opens up a space for theological reflection on the “beyond” of the editor’s question: I don’t think she means that we would cease to critique commodification. For as I will suggest, the ethical challenge is precisely how to critique the commodification of life. For me that means critiquing even the model of creation as divine commodity (God owns it, therefore you can’t). And such a critique, as I believe she means, must rest in some form of constructive cosmology—some account of the relationship of our subjectivity to our materiality, of meaning to earth, that does not reinscribe either the old dualisms (mind over matter) or the old reductionisms (nothing but matter).

The great mathematician-turned-cosmologist, A. N. Whitehead, wrote in the 1920s that “religion will not gain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science.” By this he meant the spirit of adventure within an open universe of interactive events. The experimental sciences have been a major locus in the West of a highly disciplined but profoundly playful creativity, charged with a curiosity and wonder that the religious traditions have often stifled in themselves. Process theology (C. Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, Jr., Marjorie Suchoki) has carried the Whiteheadian flame for decades: God appears no longer as the eternally unchanging, omnipotent designer, but rather as the cosmic eros luring forth intensities surprising also to God. This God does not create as a means of control; the shape of creation depends entirely upon creaturely decision. Religion does not have to withhold some portion of reality from science for God. However, it lays a godly responsibility upon humans—not just to make but to make good. When God declares the creation “very good,” it is not as a king applauding his own accomplishment; it is the wild spirit of the universe, who, according to the Hebrew, “vibrates” over the face of the deep, delighting in its materializations. Clearly that delight relies upon and models an intensive sense of the common, with extensive ecological, social, and economic implications. (See John Cobb and Hermann Daly, *For the Common Good*.)

When competition ceases to serve larger cooperative ends, the system begins to divide against itself. Responsibility does not mean obeying fixed legalities but, as the theologian H.R. Niebuhr had it, responsiveness, in the old sense of fittingness (the nose is responsive to the face): responsive selves in relation. Responsibility intensifies creativity—scientific, artistic, emotional, religious—by the





HANK MEALS

One
role
of

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democratizing justice which enables intensification by mutual interaction.

Concretely, then? I don't think the ethical task is a matter of drawing an arbitrary line in the sand between acceptable and unacceptable levels of cultural interaction with nature. I don't think we can say in advance that all production of transgenic organisms, all creation of genetic hybrids, is irresponsible. However, we can say for sure that the decisions as to which technologies to develop, how and for whom to develop them, are *not* being made responsibly. That is, given corporate control of funding for research, technoscientific agendas are being set for purposes of profit and power for the few. We must therefore create democratic channels by which we can demand that boundary-crossing biotechnical decisions be available to wide public scrutiny and debate, as is more the case already in Europe (partly spurred on by the campaigns against Monsanto's "Frankenfarms"). We are systematically being denied basic democratic consumer rights, such as the labelling of bioengineered foods, in the name of corporate rights. Moreover, the issues of race, class, and sexuality that will be arising in new and alarming ways along with the capacity for intruding in the human genome demand new means of public accountability. "Genes R Us" is quickly turning from a passive determinism to an active cultural determination of human "nature." The potentiality for humane cures to myriad human ills is attractive, but only to the extent the corporations dictating the technology are held accountable—no doubt through a combination of consumer pressures and government regulation—to a full spate of ethical perspectives.

I agree with biologist and science theorist Donna Haraway: "Genes for profit are not equal to science itself, or to economic health. Genetic sciences and politics are at the heart of critical struggles for equality, democracy and sustain-

able life." (*Modest Witness @ 2nd Millenium Female Man Meets Onco Mouse*) But she goes on to sound the countertone, which ironically dovetails with the biblical position I have outlined. She criticizes the "left," which she identifies for its tendency "to collapse molecular genetics, biotechnology, profit and exploitation into one undifferentiated mass." However, I do not share the outright apocalyptic enthusiasm of my colleague Peters for what he sees as the technoscientific capacity to help God bring about the New Jerusalem, where "crying and pain will be no more" (Rv. 21:4). The denial of death—which will always involve crying and pain—whether in theological or technological guise, will not contribute to the just and sustainable allocation of resources throughout the planet. The luxury of benign interventions at high expense for a few must always be weighed against the common good. For the majority on this planet just six or seven decades of a reasonably well-nourished life would be pretty much heaven—and not far from what Jesus hoped for in the "new creation."

But for its misogyny, the more appropriate apocalyptic image for the current amalgam of technoscientific, transnational corporate power is Revelation's allegory of Roman imperialism, the Whore of Babylon. Thus in the face of public protest in England, employees of Monsanto there have been—with the secret truth of the tongue-in-cheek—referring to their employer as "Mon Satan." Yesterday I saw a delightful one-act play by Daniel Kinch, *A Good Day To Pie*, whose solo role was performed by Rebecca Pridmore, a student from my seminary. The play, which exposes the frightening transgenic and transnational schemes of Monsanto, was inspired by the sentencing to a year in prison of a food activist, who, after being repeatedly ignored by Monsanto, threw a pie in the face of an executive. Why wouldn't justice be for sale along with life?



Since the biblical traditions gave rise to the notion of justice as liberation from oppression, it is against the commodification of life that the prophetic protest directs itself. “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.” But Third Isaiah, whose words remain all too relevant, is not entirely pessimistic: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness.” Indeed, the next verse suggests that we may need less fancy medical technology if we pursue justice instead: “And the Lord will guide you continually...and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (Isaiah 58:11; 59:14).

To the degree that Protestantism has any moral voice to raise in response to biotechnology, it must ground itself in scripture. I opened therefore by quoting relevant scripture, for it is the enunciation of a form of premodern knowledge of the universe that builds into itself the criterion of beneficence. I must admit that, though this text belongs to the canon for Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, for Protestants and Jews it counts as apocryphal, deutero-canonical. This female voice of the Creator as Wisdom (in Greek, Sophia; in Hebrew, Hochma) has appeared again in our contemporary communities of discourse, prophetic precisely from her off-center but indelibly scriptural location. She appears more subserviently, but still luminously, in the canonical book of Proverbs as the cosmological Wisdom and “beloved daughter” (or female architect, depending on the translation) by which Yahweh creates. This cosmic Sophia, fashioner of all things, she who “orders all things far and nigh,” provides the closest analogue to later natural law, or God’s immanence in the creation. And at the same time, as the closest biblical equivalent to rationality, she is that by which humans participate in that cosmic knowledge. This does not mean we can expect to be wise. We may rather love and get wisdom; indeed, “wisdom is easily found by those who seek her.” She does not play hard to get; but she does play hard—she “rejoices daily in the inhabited world” (Prov. 8:30-31).

One role of the biblical traditions in relation to technoscience will be to call science to its own wisdom. We are not in a position to give or pronounce wisdom; we must, however, work incessantly to lure the culture of technoscience toward a form of knowing that goes beyond the pretense of value-free, objectively disinterested detachment, toward an intelligence that is “clear” and “penetrating” precisely in its humanness, love of goodness, beneficence, and justice. This can and must be cultivated from within science itself. Thus I take heart when I read biologist Stuart Kaufmann, who wrote in his book *At Home in the Universe*. “Since the time of Bacon our Western tradition has regarded knowledge as power. But as the scale of our activities in space and time has increased, we are being driven to understand the limited scope of our understanding, and even our potential understanding.... It would be wise to be wise. We enter a new millennium. It is best to do so with gentle reverence for the ever-changing and unpredictable places in the sun that we craft ever anew for

one another. We are all at home in the universe, poised to sanctify by our best, brief, only stay.”

To *sanctify* means to “make holy,” and in such making, we are as a species and as its individuals both being born and being made, ever again. If God is holy, then of course we are, humbly and minimally, playing God. This play is constructive work. It is that for which we must take responsibility and through which we must try to slow technology down to the speed of wisdom. Wisdom in Proverbs invites all who would come to her table. Or, as *A Good Day to Pie* concludes, “This is the picture that counts. It’s people sharing. A bowl of unadulterated rice. A bowl of beans that haven’t been engineered. Breaking bread the way people have been breaking bread since there were people.” Here’s an odd hope: perhaps with the decline of the cultural hegemony of Christianity, we may also expect less of the technoscientific defiance bred from Promethean revolt against a hegemonic God. In the subtle mobility of Sophia, permeating rather than controlling everything, there is little to react against; but so much to respond to. New and beneficent coalitions may be forming just beyond this millennium, just beyond our knowing.



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