



Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

2 August, Helen Whatmough, “Social Enterprise – a new business model?”

A business model to build up the earning potential (of Australians) who are least fortunate, which also complements the private sector.

9 August, Colin Whatmough “What I Believe.”

Colin will examine Peter Andrews ideas to replenish the Australian landscape through his research at Tarwyn Park. This relates to the present time with regard to large coal mines to be permitted on the fertile Liverpool Plains.

16 August, Rev Geoff Usher: “Jan Hus and the Flaming Chalice: Our Symbol and Its Story - Part 1”

The symbol of the Chalice and Flame—commonly known as the flaming chalice—has become recognised internationally as the symbol for Unitarian and Unitarian universalist congregations. This and a second service trace its history and development.

23 August, Morandir Armson : “The Religions of the Indian Sub-Continent.”

The Indian sub-continent is the birthplace of three of the major world religions; Buddhism, Hinduism or San tan Dharma, and Sikhism. In addition to these three, the Jain religion, an ancient faith that is probably the ancestor of Buddhism, also exists in India. These four faiths are all connected; but how, and in what manner?

This will be the talk that was cancelled in July.

30 August, Rev Geoff Usher: “The Flaming Chalice in the Twentieth Century: Our Symbol and Its Story - Part 2”

~~~~~  
**Refugee Children.**

In discussions over the years, various views have been expressed by our membership on how “the refugee problem” should be tackled. However, there has been a consistent concern about the situation of refugee children. See pp 5 - 8 *JT*

# Biotechnology: Legitimate Ethical Concerns

*Dr Robert Woog*

## Introduction

Evidence suggests that our understanding of how to bring about various results by means of genetic manipulation is developing rapidly. It is being vehemently debated that our understanding of what it is that we are doing is not keeping up. The debate is not so much focused on the technology as on the products, particularly food products and the rapid commercialisation of those products. There is an emotional response to matters relating to good because it is seen as directly affecting immediate health and well-being.

Consumer judgement about the use of biotechnology is more likely to be in the nature of an automatic response: a culturally archetypal response rather than a richly scientifically informed one. Discourse about biotechnology seems to be constructed around individual references rather than through a framework that sees the citizen as a member of a diverse global community where short, medium and long-term goals and needs differ enormously. In order to lay bare the various influences on the debate, what would be helpful is a discursive exploration of the "lived world" – of citizens incorporating their knowledge and experience – instead of a debate of only those who express concern or assume to speak on behalf of all.

This paper is an exercise in reflection and a quest to contribute to the debate about genetic technology from an ethical perspective.

A number of approaches may be taken to develop the theme of argument in this paper. One approach is that every major theoretical position, such as that on which biotechnology is based, carries its own burden of proof. The assumption behind this approach is, that we (society) do well to take the position of concerned doubter, and that the onus of responsibility is with those involved with the new technologies to convince us that it is both safe and beneficial to proceed. Instead of assuming an adversarial position in demanding "burden of

proof', I will seek to explore what the principles are that inform and legitimate the debate about genetic engineering. During this process of exploration I will seek to hold up the informing principles for inspection.

## Stating the Obvious Tentatively

Is confidence about the benefits of genetically modified organisms for human kind, appropriate? Is concern about the effect of genetically modified organisms on human kind, appropriate? The answer to both questions is yes. How can this apparent paradox be explained?

Both answers are based on assumptions about the future. They express different expectations based on different assumptions. However, if we take the position that there is no 'future' but only 'expectations about the future', both propositions have validity. Insofar as assumptions are the taking of interpretations upon oneself, arguments based on values are on more of an equal footing than any of the protagonists would like to admit to.

In the recent past we have come to trust science to do the right thing and to do the thing right. However in the course of human experience, science and technology have burgeoned way beyond the capacity of our collective social understanding. Each new development, each new insight has brought with it fear and hope which has developed into related fields of myth and doubt. Galileo's theory that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around was considered blasphemous by the Church. Darwin's theory of evolution was considered blasphemous and unnatural. Einstein's theory of relativity was considered to be disrespectful of an ordered Newtonian Universe. Often, reason is subordinated to myth. Every society values its myths because they are a way of explaining things at a level that is accessible to the majority. The debate around biotechnology is often fuelled by deeply held concerns that we are 'playing God', disturbing nature and taking unacceptable risks. Let us now examine some of the myths that have grown up around genetic engineering.

## **Geneticists as Sinners and Abominations before God**

It is possible for some people to hold the view that God has created a perfect natural order and to consider that to interfere with that order by crossing species' genetic boundaries is blasphemous. Palaeontology would suggest that nature herself had more than adequately begun the process of crossing genetic boundaries. While practising species selection, crossbreeding, cultivation, fertilising, feeding and watering plants and animals, humans have actively colluded in this process well before biotechnology was ever heard of. In this regard, it may be argued that modern biotechnology is a natural extension of centuries of application of human capability. When was the line crossed, if it was crossed at all, from doing God's work in bringing forth the crops of the field and fruits of the forest to interfering with God's greater order? This is a theological and not an ethical question. Let us now quickly pass through some of the assumptions. If you believe in God, if you believe that God created order, then the nature of that order and man's apparent place and involvement in that order is ambiguous enough that the charge of blasphemy should not be levelled at genetic manipulation. It does not mean that it will not be: remember Galileo.

There is also some justification in the concern that biotechnology may lead to a spiritual arrogance where some people believe that they are 'playing god'. If we do not know God's plan we do not want to be told some multinational corporation's interpretation of it. Equally, a zealot dressed in sackcloth or suit has no higher credibility. Claiming God's authority around this matter is not appropriate.

### **Nature as Higher Authority**

It is a common belief that everything in nature is valuable and good in and of itself and that any interference is intrinsically wrong. Brought down to its simplest level, this belief system would assert that anything natural is good and anything unnatural is bad. Staphylococcus is good, synthetic antibiotic is bad.

To assume that we can deduce what is morally right or wrong from certain facts about

nature or by following the 'the laws of nature' is both risky and foolish. The views we hold about what is natural or unnatural are based on what philosophers have described as our ontology — our beliefs about how we think the world is organised. Just because we observe that something happens in nature, it does not follow that what we have observed automatically tells us whether we ought or ought not to do something about it. It is our values and experiences that guide us with those decisions. The criticism of biotechnology on the grounds of unnaturalness does not hold up.

There has been a strong trend throughout history to venerate nature. This inclination exists today and many people, while not sacrificing a goat to the spirit of the eucalyptus tree in their back yard, share widely felt concerns that biotechnology is wrong because it is against the 'laws of nature'.

I was recently surprised to see steak advertised in the supermarket as 'natural beef'. My concern was not so much about what natural beef was but more about what was unnatural about the product that I have been consuming with such enthusiasm in the past. My musings about deviant steers was interrupted when, during the same shopping trip, I came across 'natural car polish'.

Even given my limited recent experience it may be argued that the concept of 'naturalness' is so broadly interpreted in society today as to be meaningless. Consequently, determining what is natural or unnatural on ethical or moral grounds is unlikely to be successful or useful in this discourse.

### **What is Annoying is not Necessarily Unethical**

Should human inquiry fuelled by human curiosity be curtailed because it enters into controversial and irritating areas of human understanding? Surely it must not. To do so would be denying what it is to be truly human, and in trying to avoid one unethical act we could be committing another, more grievous than the one we are seeking to avoid.

Certain activities are labelled in social terms as disrespectful. It is useful to differentiate

between what is disrespectful, that is, contrary to popular practice or social convention, and what is unethical. It may be said that much of modern technology, biotechnology included, shows a lack of respect for the environment. Here the problem is not what biotechnology does but what it misses out on doing. The concern relating to disrespect is that all life form is interconnected in a complex, self-organising unity, and intervention in a narrow reductionist way may have flow-on consequences or be amplified at higher levels of self-organisation and result in events that have ethical or moral consequences. The criticism that genetic engineering is too focused on its technology and not aware enough of its place in the broader social and ecological environment is, in fact, a telling one. However, this is a criticism that may be levelled at most high technology science and not just genetic engineering.

An argument that may be made against genetic engineering is that it may not be wise, because we are dealing with a systemic complexity that we can not possibly comprehend.

### **Ethics and Risk**

Risk is not necessarily an ethical issue. Risk and safety become ethical issues when we consider responsibility and justifiability.

Ethical concerns about genetic engineering are appropriate when irresponsible risks are thought to be taken, which may result in harm to innocent parties. Determining what possible benefit justifies a possible risk is problematic. Once again, this brings us to the realm of human value judgement. If you are pessimistic, you could construct a scenario that anything that "may" go wrong as a result of genetic engineering does, and the global effects will be catastrophic. Risk envisaged here is clearly of such magnitude that any genetic manipulation would be unjustified. An optimist would see genetic engineering as well within the capability of science and society to manage in all its forms, outcomes and collateral effects. Central to this approach, is the belief that should there be a catastrophic event, human ingenuity and determination would bring it under control and, therefore, risk that accompanies any innovation is justifiable and acceptable.

Are there particular and peculiar risks inherent in the technology that make them such high risk as to be ethically unacceptable? At this time the possible harmful effects of biotechnology remains speculative.

Excessive caution does not remove the risk of future catastrophes. Such catastrophes may come from another quarter and it may be that the product of research in genetic engineering will limit or prevent the disaster. This argument does not prove the safety of biotechnology nor does it prove the safety of not having biotechnology. It shows that different people may take and hold extraordinarily different points of view about the same thing. There is no way to hold a historical count-back to see if the optimistic or the pessimistic points of view have proved to be reliable. I am sure that there are stories of horror and triumph to be found, not unlike what can be foretold about the evolution and development of genetic engineering.

### **What May Go Wrong?**

The majority of scientists and the majority of manufacturers of biotechnology products are responsible people. However, there are huge amounts of money involved in research and product development. In an aggressively competitive market place, there will be a rush to capitalise on the investment in the new technologies. It is under these conditions that at times morally reprehensible decisions can be made. The risks include:

- That modified products may cause collateral effects on other species and affect other industries. These effects may be several steps removed from the original genetic modification, resulting in a situation where those affected will find it hard to gain recompense or even sympathy.
- That the early innovators and those with money, power, and influence may gain monopolistic control over some genetically superior materials.

That as all high technology development initially benefits the developed world and widens the gap between this and the underdeveloped world, the biotechnology of genetic manipulation will also have this result.

## Conclusions

It is in the marketing and commercialisation of genetically modified materials that one can foresee unethical behaviour more easily than in the science of genetic modification itself. However, if we were to develop social policy to minimise the risk of unethical behaviour among the multinational corporations, we would have to withhold from them products that range in harmfulness from dangerous chemicals to baby food.

While there remains the potential for unethical behaviour in the commercialisation of biotechnology there is also the potential to feed more of that very large population who remain hungry in the world. The moral significance of that potential should not be ignored.

The discourse about biotechnology is a controversial one. The arguments involving God, nature, risk, and the morality of what is right and wrong, are self-referential and, as such, are more egocentric than foundational.

In the world we live in, we know not its start or finish. We look around in the present and, if we are honest, we have to admit that we are incapable of comprehending the whole. The major risk we run is that we cannot comprehend the interconnected complexity of the world we are part of, and we run the risk that we move by easy stages to a position that none of us would want if we could see the whole from the start.

The best option available to us, and one that we have used to great effect in the past, is to move forward debating our future and reflecting on our progress without extravagant claims or exaggeration, either about our fears or hopes. A liberal philosophy is the habit of mind so exercised. A society with such a mindset could envisage a world where God could look benignly on genetically spliced or unspliced mice and men.

## End Notes

This paper has been written as an essay rather than in a scientific format and is not referenced in the traditional way. This was an attempt to make it more readable by a wider public. Material written by others was utilised

during the paper's preparation and the use of their material is gratefully acknowledged and presented in the list of references that follow.

## References

Kelley, J. 1995. *Public Perception of Genetic Engineering*; Australia, 1994. Final Report to the Department of Industry, Science and Technology.

Schibeci, R., Barns, I., Davison, A. and Kennealy. 1995. *Public Perception of Biotechnology: A Pilot Investigation*. Perth: Murdoch University.

Straughan, R. R. 1995. *Ethical Aspects of Crop Biotechnology*. In: *Issues in Agricultural Bioethics*. Ed. Mephram, T. B., Tucker, G. A. and Wiseman, J. Nottingham University Press.

Wynne, B. 1992. *Misunderstood Misunderstanding: Social Identities and Public Uptake of Science*. *Public Understanding of Science*. 1:281-304

## Rally for Baby Asha

**Address by Rev Dr Brian Brown, Ex-moderator, Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW/ACT, on 30th June, 2015 at Sydney City Hall.**

Thank you for the privilege of addressing, you, and to ASRC and ChilOut, for organizing this event, and GetUp for their support

There is something dark going on in the heart of this nation, and it has to do with children.

Just when we thought we had begun to honestly face and address the injustices of the Stolen Generation.....

Just when we are carefully delving into the festering abyss of institutional child sexual abuse...

Here we are again to ask why children and babies are put and kept in harm's way in our immigration detention centres.

We're here today because we know that, in

spite of all attempts to keep it quiet, this abuse is not a figment of our imagination.

\* Former Australian of the Year Prof Patrick McGorry called these centres “factories for producing mental illness”\*

\* The Human Rights Commission Report “The Forgotten Children” highlighted 33 reports of sexual abuse and 207 of self-harm.

\* Finally, the Moss review showed us that sexual, emotional and physical assaults against both adults and children are ongoing, placing Asha and all children there at risk.

For God’s sake, why are we still doing this? Do we think that it is right to treat helpless, vulnerable people in this way?

Apparently not! Just before the General Election of 2001 the Howard Govt. produced ‘evidence’, grainy as it was, that asylum seeker parents were throwing their children into the sea to force the navy to rescue them. (They were not as coy about reporting ‘on water matters’ as the current government!) The ‘evidence’ was concocted.

Their concocted outrage that anyone could do such things to children was embraced by the electorate, which gave Mr Howard an easy win in what should have been a tight election.

So what has happened to our compassion for defenseless children? Why is it that children were sacrosanct then, and disposable now? Why were the parents demonized for their supposed cruelty, but the current government is applauded for committing actual abuse? Don’t tell us that in both cases it was for electoral advantage! Surely no Australian Government would use children in that callous way, would they...? GOD FORBID

And they dare not tell us that the detention is to deter others from making the risky journey; because that would be illegal, and this Australian Government wouldn’t do anything illegal. Would they...? SO TELL US WHY

Attorney General Brandis tells us that Australia does not detain anyone on Manus and Nauru. It’s a matter for those Governments. Hesays

it’s not up to us how the processing centres are managed. For goodness sake man! That’s just disingenuous rubbish!

Answer us this- if you have no say in it, why are you and the Opposition trying to silence doctors and teachers from reporting the abuse? Doctors and teachers- trusted guardians of wellbeing; at worst, doing no harm. Not even the Apartheid regime had the temerity to try that one on!

And if you “have no say in it”, why did you and the ALP just last week ban mandatory reporting of child abuse on Nauru and why are social workers now under fire?

Prime Minister Abbott, when you were asked if there would be some compassion for the Rohingyas your emphatic response was “Nope nope nope”. Prime Minister, we have a three word slogan for you- SHAME! SHAME! SHAME! Shame on you and your government!

We’re not stupid, you know. We all understand that the refugee situation is a complex and difficult problem. Like you, nobody wants to see asylum seeker lives lost at sea. What we do not understand is why this compassion suddenly dissolves into cruel punishment of those who survive the journey. The saying “Between the devil and the deep blue sea” comes to mind.

And where is the Opposition- or should I say, the Collusion? Yes Mr Shorten, we are told that you are wedged on this one. But seeing that your party introduced offshore processing in 1992, don’t you think you have some responsibility here? You clearly have little faith in the capacity for compassion and intelligence in the Australian people. Or is it that you don’t stand for a fair go anymore? SURELY, SURELY NOT

And where are the defenders of the children in the Christian Church? A bishop here, a priest there? The odd minister and pastor? A few lay-folk? Thank God for organisations such as Love makes a Way, that two weeks ago sang in the foyer of Parliament “Were you there when the kids were locked away?” and “Were you there when the nation turned

its face?"- and were thrown out for trespassing! I also want to acknowledge the many people of faith here today.

Where is the voice of the church that nurtured politicians in the Faith where Jesus says "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them for of such is the Kingdom of heaven"? Not specific enough? Then try this:

"It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause these little ones to stumble"

Mr Morrison, Mr Dutton, Mr Abbott: did you get that?

The church's near silence on these atrocities in indefensible. "SHAME ON US!" "SHAME ON US!"

There is also another group that has a lot to answer for here: the mainstream media, and one part of it in particular. Tell us - do you never get embarrassed by your role of halleluia chorus to the hard-line policies of this Government, or your silence about the cruel and unusual punishment of these children? Are you so beholden to 'God knows who' that you are prepared to put your ethics, your professionalism and independence on the back burner? DO YOUR JOB!

And finally, the people of Australia. Opinions are all over the place on this. Come on, people. WE ARE BETTER THAN THIS. To you, here tonight, I want to say: THANK YOU for being here. Thank you for caring. If the Government, the Opposition, the Church and the Press are not going to protect the children, we have to keep trying.

So- Stay strong! Speak out! Walk the path with heart. Keep hope alive!

**This stirring speech by Rev. Dr. Brian Brown was contributed to Esprit by Rev. Eric Stevenson.**

~~~~~  
I know there will be letter-writers among the readership ready to use the above article as the basis for contacting their federal representative. JT

We know the results of the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948.

The Legacy of Syria's Refugee Disaster Awaits.

The following is part of an article by Charles Glass, former ABC News (US) chief Middle East correspondent, who recently published "Syria Burning: ISIS and the Death of the Arab Spring" (OR Books).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, has just declared that 4 million Syrians are now refugees in neighboring countries. That is almost six times greater than the number who fled Palestine. Another 7.6 million Syrians, he says, have also lost their homes but remain destitute within Syria. Guterres said, "This is the biggest refugee population from a single conflict in a generation."

The U.N. reports that Lebanon, a country of 4 million, has taken in 1.2 million Syrians. This figure is probably an underestimate, because not all refugees register with the U.N. Almost all these Syrians, like the Palestinians before them, are Sunni Muslims whose mere presence upsets the delicate sectarian balance through which the Lebanese attempt to govern themselves. Where the Palestinians caused fear among the Christians, the Syrian Sunnis pose a threat to the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah. Hezbollah depends on its Shiite plurality in Lebanon to hold power while it fights for the regime in Syria against Sunni Muslim jihadis. In Lebanon, displaced Syrians live where they can. Some dwell in unfinished buildings, others in schools or farms. Lebanon does not wish to establish camps for them as it did for the Palestinians after 1948. Jordan has taken 630,000, many of whom languish in desert camps along the border with Syria. Another 1.8 million Syrians have settled in Turkey, which has no intention of providing permanent homes for either Kurds or Arabs from Syria. Astoundingly, 250,000 Syrians have fled to Iraq despite the war there.

Before the war began in 2011, Syria fed itself and provided almost all of its medicines from

flourishing pharmaceutical industries. Now it is dependent on foreign charity that is anything but adequate. The U.N. says that of the \$4.53 billion needed for displaced Syrians to survive, it has received only \$1.06 billion in the first half of this year. Guterres lamented that aid falls far short of “the most basic survival needs of millions of people over the coming six months.”

The U.N. has had to cut food supplies to 1.6 million refugees. John Owen reported on Voice of America that the monthly food allowance for refugees in Lebanon has been reduced from \$27 last January to \$13.50. Try feeding yourself on \$13.50 a month to understand the reasons behind the desire of some Syrians to escape the region to feed their children. One 22-year-old Syrian, Osama al-Raqa, who lost his chance to go to university because of the war, told Agence France-Presse, “I dream of leaving to Europe. Europeans eat and live in houses. We, on the other hand, are homeless and the whole world treats us like a burden.”

Syrians who can flee the poverty of refugee camps and shantytowns in the Middle East are paying smugglers to take them by land and sea to Europe. Of the 137,000 people who attempted the perilous voyage across the Mediterranean to Western Europe in the

first six months of this year, the U.N. says that one third were Syrians. The fact that many of them drowned has not deterred the others, who face living death without proper sustenance in the Middle East.

To imagine that the long-term plight of millions of Syrian refugees in the Middle East and Europe will have no consequences is folly on a greater scale than predicting the Palestinian refugee problem would disappear after 1948. This is a political more than a humanitarian issue. For the refugee exodus to stop, the war must end.

While millions of Syrians are fleeing, tens of thousands of jihadi volunteers are coming in. They are the shock troops of the self-styled Islamic State, which with Saudi and Turkish backing has taken control of large swathes of Syria and Iraq that it calls its caliphate. Its oppressive rule is reminiscent, albeit in religious garb, of the brutality of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Indeed, Ahmed S. Hashim wrote in Middle East Policy that Saddam’s former intelligence operatives were “maintaining special detachments for conducting assassinations, kidnappings and the collection of funds” for ISIS. **READ MORE** <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/07/14/syrian-refugee-crisis-will-transform-middle-east-politics/>
Could this article be the basis for a discussion on “What can Australia do for Syria’s refugees?” JT

Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 . If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website www.sydneynunitarians.org . Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher or Ginna Hastings for an application form at the Sunday service.

If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit. It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jtendys@yahoo.com.au or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Although we have an Associate Minister, Rev. Geoff Usher, we are primarily a lay-led congregation. **Perhaps you have a topic to share?** We welcome any topic ideas, offers to speak or names of suitable speakers for our meetings whom we could approach. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service.*

Fellowship contact 0466 940 461