The Project

Religious spokespeople recognize that the quickest way to get marginalized in a discussion about nanotechnology is to appear “anti-technology.” Thus they make sure to emphasize that this is not their position. Philippa Taylor argues:

“We need to be clear that biotechnology is not inherently wrong. In fact, technology, generally speaking, is a human good. Humans are technologists by nature and by vocation.”

After all, we remain under the covenantal obligations to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Wise stewardship of our created world requires some form of technology...

The next step in the argument is often that technologies are not value free—they can be used to promote certain values and inhibit certain values. In many ways some religious speakers adhere to a co-production line of argument. Donald Bruce, Director of the Society, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland argues:

“[A] technology reflects values and goals of the society within which it emerges and, in turn, may alter the values and aspirations of that society.”

After establishing the importance of technology in the world and its values, many of these groups call for actions like Guston and Searle’s proposal for “Real Time Technology Assessment.” They call for the implications of technologies to be assessed before they are integrated into the world. As Philippa Taylor puts it:

“The introduction of a new technology often follows a common path—first its development behind closed doors, then the winning over of the public with predictions of life-saving advances, then finally, a regulatory regime to fit the already completed package. Clearly it is much better to have regulatory regimes set up earlier in the process.”

Finally they argue that religious thinkers should play an important role in these regulatory regimes because religions have a tradition and claimed authority over ethical questions like: What does it mean to be human? What is human good? and other metaphysical questions which they claim science cannot answer. Donald Bruce explains:

“Traditional presuppositions hold that there are moral or societal bounds which restrain what may be technically feasible in intervening in the human condition. These limits are drawn from the insights of the religious and cultural traditions, philosophy and theology, the arts and humanities, and the social sciences.”

Making their Pitch

Proponents of Religious Dialogue

Those who speak on behalf of religious policies in the area of nanotechnology policy come from a variety of backgrounds. They include scientists and engineers who want to link their faith and their work (e.g. Kennell Touryan1, a mechanical engineer at the UDOOI and Tibsmer Torb-Fejel2, an engineer at General Dynamics); ethicists (often bioethicists like Philippa Taylor3, associate director of the Centre for Bioethics and Public Policy), and theologians (like Burghardt Bock4, a Lutheran theologian at the Philadelphia University of Marburg).

Responses

This research has not progressed far enough to give a clear view of the impact these efforts have had. But their power is being felt, especially by transhumanists. In an extreme example, William Bainbridge – co-director of Human Centered Computing at the National Science Foundation and one of the architects of U.S. federal funding of nanotechnology – sees the power of religion to be an imminent threat to the values he is trying to promote. He interprets the “religiously-based movement to ban human reproductive cloning as a warning to transhumanists and believes that “Theologians are likely to pronounce AI anathema, and the episode could lead to suspension of public funding for AI research, and even to outright legal prohibition.” He fears that as science disproves the “biblical-world view... there is no guarantee that religion will accept graceful retirement, rather than battle cognitive science to the death.” While this is likely an extreme example, it does demonstrate that those who exercise a great deal of control over the development of nanotechnology believe that religiously-justified input into nanotechnology policy is likely to increase in scope and power.