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Extending the Frontiers of Science

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

August 7, 1995

The Most Reverend William B. Friend
Bishop of Shreveport
2500 Line Avenue
Shreveport, Louisiana 71104-3043

Dear Bishop Friend:

Thank you for the thoughtful letter and for enclosing a copy of your paper. It would be wonderful to have a chance to talk together about all the issues surrounding the patenting of genes, tissues, cells etc. For now, letters will have to do. However, if you find that you are coming to Washington, please let me know. Perhaps we could get together and talk. For now, I would just try to make a few points.

First, I don't think that the distinction between human and animal genes is a useful division of the issues. In some instances, they are chemically identical. Moreover, because most isolated genes are reproduced in bacteria, regardless of source, there is literally no way to distinguish chemically identical genes from two different animals, say chimps and humans. Where difference in DNA sequence exist, there is often either no or a trivial difference in the structure of the protein encoded by the gene.

Few, if any, biologists, would say that a human being is completely described by her or his genes. Thus, your view and that of biologists' is probably closer than might be imagined. One of the problems in Rifkin's letter is saying things like : "turning life into patented inventions". No single gene is "life", not even an entire genome would be called "life" by a biologist. Rifkin's letter also creates ambiguities about creation. Here, there is conflict between the views of fundamentalist Protestant groups and those of biologists. But the Catholic position, as described by Pope John Paul II is most consistent with that of biologists. "The Bible itself speaks to us of the origin of the Universe and its make-up not in order to provide us with a scientific treatise but in order to state the correct relationships of man with God and the universe...it expresses itself in the terms of the cosmology in use at the time of the writer" (October, 1981, address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences).

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Actually, I am not very happy about a lot of the patenting that is going on. Some of it is unjustified by the level of knowledge. Some of it will restrict open investigation of important biomedical problems. But whether they are correct or not, the industry believes it must have patents to proceed with costly development of new therapies. Given that belief, we will not have important advances without the patents. So we have to resolve the relative value for human life of new therapies and vaccines compared to discouraging such developments by prohibiting patents.

The question of values brings us to Leon Kass who has been a friend for years. He and I disagree quite fundamentally. I do not believe that the advances in genetics will dehumanize anyone. I think that human beings are much to special and resilient for that. In my view, the pressures for dehumanization are within humans themselves. The Nazis taught us that. That is why for me, the really essential thing is to be sure that the entire world's population shares in the benefits of the new research, that it is applied without discrimination, and in keeping with the desires and hopes of each person. It is true that commercialization presents challenges to these aims. But without commercialization, we won't even have the opportunities. It is an uneasy bargain, but a realistic one.

How would you feel about my sending a copy of this letter to Rabbi Sapirstein?

I look forward to continued dialogue.

Very warmest regards,

Sincerely,

Maxine F. Singer

MFS/sb

[Dictated by Dr. Singer; signed
and mailed in her absence]