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Benefits of genetically modified food outweigh its risk

By SAMUEL GREGG

In the book of Genesis, it is made abundantly clear to Jews, Christians, and Muslims that humans are not destined to relate to the material world in the way that animals do. Instead, humans are expected to use their reason, creativity, and capacity to work in ways that express and extend man's dominion and stewardship over the earth.

To be sure, this theme of being a cooperator with God's Creative Act is not to be seen as a licence for us to engage in wanton destructiveness and ecological irresponsibility. The Scriptures insist, over and over again, that none of our free choices may infringe God's moral law — a law knowable through faith and reason.

Humans are, nonetheless, given tremendous scope in the ways that they may fulfil their responsibility to fill the earth and conquer it. And from the beginning of history, humans have done this. Some of our earliest ancestors, for example, were the first to engage in cross-breeding animal species, cross-fertilising plants, and using the insights of science to make food safer and more plentiful.

This is one reason why so many Christians, especially in the

developing world, find the opposition to genetically modified (GM) food — overwhelmingly from wealthy western nations, especially the European Union (EU) — to be somewhat puzzling. Despite all the evidence attesting to the safety of GM food, many environmental activists and movements persist in pressuring governments in the developed and developing world to restrict, if not totally prohibit, the implantation or use of GM food.

There are, however, signs that the pressures of feeding their populations are causing many developing countries to proceed cautiously down the path of allowing GM foods to be cultivated. In early June 2004, the Kenyan government decided to support, with qualifications, the use of genetically modified organisms to increase agricultural yields, particularly by enhancing the resistance of crops to drought and diseases particular to East Africa. The object is, in part, to enhance Kenya's ability to feed its population.

Over 700 years ago, Thomas Aquinas identified three reasons why private property was not only licit, but necessary. The first was that people tend to take better care of what is theirs than of what is common to everyone, since indi-

viduals tend to shirk a responsibility that is nobody's in particular.

In making this point, Aquinas implicitly acknowledged that incentives matter. Why, for instance, would anyone take up private farming in a serious way in a country like Zimbabwe, when they cannot be sure that their land will be stolen from them by cronies of the regime? Why would anyone open a business in downtown Harare when they discover that it is impossible to have legitimate contracts enforced?

Of course, this points to the larger problem that cripples so many developing countries. It is not that they lack natural resources or creative entrepreneurs. These are possessed in abundance. It is that certain institutional preconditions for economic growth are missing, the most significant being the rule of law and private property rights. If either of these components is absent, sustainable economic development is extremely difficult; corruption is certain.

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