

Amy Laura Hall, Duke University Divinity School

## ***Conceiving Parenthood: The Protestant Spirit of Biotechnological Reproduction***

### Introduction

The most complicated questions in North American bioethics occur at the intersection of reproduction and technology, for several reasons. First, given an abiding commitment to reproductive freedom, North Americans are reticent to discuss restrictions on biotechnologically enhanced reproduction and parenting. Second, as medical advances become further domesticated, it becomes increasingly difficult to judge private, consumer choices as matters of public evaluation. Third, the promises of scientifically perfected reproduction are embedded in a dream as old as Benjamin Franklin – through human inventiveness, each generation can remake itself. Unless challenged, arguments for individual privacy, choice, and initiative will likely continue to dominate reproductive bioethics in the U.S.

Yet intertwined with these three assumptions are characteristic aspirations to remain open to newcomers and responsible for vulnerable populations. With advances in reproductive and pediatric technologies, there is the potential to unravel these aspirations on the micro-scale. Carefully marketed medicine encourages individual parents to manipulate offspring at the embryonic, fetal, or pediatric level to meet aesthetic and economic expectations. The implications, however, go beyond individual homes, potentially to transform the public evaluation of care and spending for poor children and other children with overt needs. Marian Wright-Edelman's effort to "leave no child behind" must already contend with the growing assumption that each child is a choice, and therefore solely the responsibility of his or her own parents. If parents within the decision-making classes become capable of precision-tuning their offspring to navigate the demands of a highly competitive and aesthetically homogenous culture, parents who do not follow suit, whether for economic or religious reasons, may be seen as irresponsible and, ultimately, left to their own devices. This could bring an unprecedented rift between well-planned and supposedly ill-designed families.

Some scholars in the United States have noted this danger and advocated for public funding to allow every prospective parent to choose freely in the marketplace of reproductive and pediatric medicine. Rayna Rapp, in her book *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*, argues that individual women may reliably navigate the new terrain of biotechnology if granted legal and subsidized access to the tools available. I take issue with this line of argument for two reasons. First, I believe that Rapp's emphasis on distributive justice underestimates the cultural cost of medically calibrated reproduction and parenting; so to embrace technological innovation and parental freedom may undermine vital notions of collective responsibility toward all children, and particularly toward children with overt needs. Not only does every child, as child, require a kind of adult attention that involves our relinquishing notions of mastery and control, but, even in the constructed bio-utopia of reproductive perfection, some children will inevitably fall through the cracks of finitude and require intense care. Cultivating the illusion of control through a freer and affordable marketplace of biotechnology will predictably exacerbate present neglect. Second, I suspect that scientifically enhanced parenting in the United States is *resiliently* encoded to benefit those of economic and cultural privilege. The marketing of technological parenting in the last century has routinely traded on the distinction between promising and inauspicious children, and practices of reproductive testing are shaped by a culture that has used such screens for purposes of defining and enforcing normalcy. The rhetoric of well-planned families works in large part due to our fear of the out-of-control household. By assessing particular medical practices and procedures within this historical context, we may suspect that the equal distribution of reproductive and pediatric technologies is not only morally problematic, but also unlikely. The possible shape of the twenty-first century begs for a conversation about the past.

### Project Summary

One vital element in the growth of biotechnological parenting has been the influence of mainline Protestantism. In the last century, medical science served increasingly as a means for the Protestant middle-class to distinguish its own well-conceived children from the accidental masses. Through

modern infant formula, atomic science, expert advice, and the careful breeding of “fitter families,” Protestants industriously sought to differentiate their own children from the offspring of the irresponsible classes and faiths. Applying their famous work ethic to the prevailing spirit of reproduction, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists made way for the cultural normalization of new reproductive and pediatric technologies. The well-bred and medically-managed Protestant family became the norm to which other Americans aspired and by which they were judged. The specter of the profligate Appalachian, African-American, or immigrant family, and the shame that a disabled child brought on an otherwise “responsible” family, are implicit (and at times explicit) factors in the promotion of the medical tools for crafting a better family.

I believe that this is not an inevitable outgrowth of Protestant thought, but a development of mainline Protestantism in the U.S. Reformed notions of election, progress, and ordered normalcy took on particular emphases when mainline Christians sought to establish themselves as responsible citizens in a country intent on efficient growth and scientific innovation. There are considerable resources within Protestant thought to counteract these emphases. By underscoring a common responsibility for all children and by exposing the quest to calibrate and perfect one’s own offspring as insufficiently gracious, Protestants may newly normalize hospitality toward dependent life. Through multiple articles and a book, I wish primarily to document the influence of mainline Protestantism on American conceptions of the family and, secondarily, to encourage a theological suspicion of masterful reproduction. The project remains, in relevant ways, Protestant; I will not argue that the development of scientifically regulated and enhanced parenthood in the U.S. is contrary to our created nature, but rather that this development is a betrayal of the gratuitous hospitality shown in the ministry and work of Jesus Christ. I am seeking to wage a critique of biotechnology that assumes the possibility of radical grace rather than the normativity of nature. By publishing and presenting this research in ecclesial and academic circles, I wish to encourage educators, clergy, and laity to evaluate biotechnological reproduction and parenting with this history and an alternative witness in view.

#### Chapter Descriptions

In “The *Good Baby*,” I explore manuals of pregnancy and parenting from 1920 to the present, describing the ways that developments in work and leisure have shaped medical, popular, and dominant Protestant evaluations of the culturally compliant versus the supposedly intractable infant or child. For instance, whereas a previous generation of aspiring middle-class women were asked whether their baby was a “good” eater, today’s comparable mother is most likely to hear “Does she sleep?” I hypothesize that this development is due in part to the failure of an American economy to make room and time for the interruption of children as women entered the workplace. Rather than adjusting to the reality of embodied life, the marketplace continued to run on the assumption that working women would gauge their childbearing and rearing to heighten production. Bringing the discussion into the present, I will compare the advice of William Sears (an advocate of attachment parenting popular among liberal Protestants), James Dobson (a mainstream, evangelical advocate of scheduling), and the *What to Expect* series, which functions for mainline Protestants as the revelatory word in prenatal and childcare.

In “The Corporate Breast,” I document a scientific and corporate effort, which began at the turn of the last century, to convince mothers in North America to trust scientific technology for the sustenance of their children. “Is your baby enjoying *The Results of Progress* in infant feeding?” So asks an advertised letter to modern-minded mothers of 1933, signed by Dan Gerber himself. The letter continues, “When you are confused about anything you do not understand, you ask someone who knows. Why not do this in the vitally important matter of food for your baby?” If a harried mother today seeks to find on the virtual highway “someone who knows” about her hyperactive child – performing a *Google* search with the keyword “ADHD” – an advertisement pops up for “welcometoordinary.com,” a Lilly Pharmaceuticals website. A green road sign beckons “Welcome to Ordinary,” a world where a happy family (also pictured) can enjoy a “much-needed relaxing family dinner,” thanks to the newest ADHD treatment from Lilly. In this chapter, I will suggest a possible connection between the rise of artificial infant nourishing in North America and the pursuit of

normalcy through pediatric pharmaceuticals. While bioethicists have rightly condemned the exporting of formula to developing nations, I seek here to consider the more subtly problematic ways that medical advertising for scientifically enhanced nourishment helped to shape middle-class aspirations. By examining this previous intersection of science, gender, and home economics, we may better understand the current attraction of pediatric pharmaceuticals as the route toward an ordinary home life.

In “To Form a More Perfect Union,” I begin by describing the “fitter family” movement that flourished in the United States from the turn of the last century until WW II. This concerted, carefully popularized effort among white Americans encouraged “prudent” marriages and discouraged the unfit or “tainted” from procreating. While ethicists have noted the patently unjust miscegenation laws and forced sterilization that occurred during this period, some historians have helpfully noted the ways the movement used other, less overtly coercive means for shaping the popular imagination. The effort engineered by the American Eugenics Society (formerly based at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, NY) brought the “science” of eugenics into American churches, homes, and county fairs. (It is worth noting here an institutional genealogy: not only does Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory still exist, its current president is James Watson.) At exhibits across the country, farmers, plumbers and housewives were warned: “Some are born to be a burden on the rest,” and the explicit goal was to prevent such births. While most Roman Catholics and fundamentalists refused these efforts, mainline Protestants took up the charge with enthusiasm, legitimizing the politics of scientifically calibrated families apparent throughout the last century. Competing in sermon contests waged by the AES and writing on the need to avoid the propagation of burdensome children, mainline Protestant leaders helped to shape the movement. By bringing back into bioethical memory this history, we may note the ways that the marketing of reproductive and pediatric biotechnologies continues to trade on fears of unregulated children and the burden of children with seemingly intractable needs.

In “For Domestic Security,” I narrate a link between the “atomic era” and the “genomic age” – each a federal/corporate effort that has consciously created a powerful icon for the “best” that science provides for the American family. Both of these national projects consciously created a powerful icon that came to indicate the road to a promising and safe homeland. Through various media – from “Atom Ant” to cereal boxes to billboards to Walt Disney’s “Our Friend the Atom” and Disneyland’s display of atomic kitchens in “Tomorrowland” – young and old were encouraged to see atomic science as the wave of the future. By considering how the simple figure of an atom functioned previously at the intersection of safety, comfort, control, and parenthood, we may more effectively describe and question the current function of the double-helix as a cultural icon. I surmise that the double-helix encourages a reliance on genetic knowledge for the securing of our children’s future, particularly in its application through prenatal and pre-implantation genetic testing. Analyzing the national tour of the “Genomic Revolution” exhibit, for example, I wish to examine how genomic science is marketed to the public as a new way to perceive and manage life itself.

In “Have It Your Way,” I consider how biotechnology informs the growing adoption industry, arguing for a connection between the use of scientific technology in reproduction and the burgeoning field of adoption medicine, whereby infants and children are evaluated as bearing promise or burden. Here I hypothesize that the marketing of reproductive and prenatal technology informs not only the quest for children to whom we are biologically related, but also the process of adoption. I surmise a link between our increased use of scientific technology in reproduction and our ever-increasing use of video, Internet, and other technologies to search and test for compatible children to adopt. Adapting to the shift toward consumer parenting, many traditionally Protestant and secular adoption agencies present images of attractive, “healthy” babies available for the choosing. Contrasting prior appeals to adoptive parents with those at present suggests a significant change in the way we think about the care of children generally. I hypothesize that an increased reliance on medical resources to treat infertility and to pursue “a child all my own” is indicative of a larger culture of neglect toward medically and socially challenging children. Set up to expect and hope for a child who will be “our own,” we are limited in our capacity to care for those who are significantly different from our prayers and

expectations. Already, there are physicians who specialize in viewing and assessing videos of orphaned infants; soon adoptive parents may have the capacity to request genetic testing prior to accepting an available child. The trend to view adoption as a familial choice rather than as a social responsibility contradicts a Protestant affirmation that each child is, as God's own, also my own. Here I will speculate on the ways that biotechnology will increasingly inform the adoption industry, as parents seek scientific assurance that a prospective child will more or less comply with expectations already formed.

In "Reconceiving Parenthood" I will draw together the themes of premonitory parenting, control, and Protestant normalcy, offering alongside this trajectory an alternative vision of children as an inevitably complicated and blessed interruption. I will suggest that mainline Protestants may use their cultural clout now to argue for the recalibration of societal and economic norms to allow for those who are developmentally dependent as well as those who are perpetually dependent – that is, for the young, the aged, the economically disadvantaged, and the presently disabled. To do so may help to correct, if not reverse, the ways that mainline Protestantism has fostered a society increasingly intent to encourage efficiency and enhance economic productivity through biotechnology.

### Select Bibliography

Apple, Rima D. *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890-1950*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

Black, Edwin. *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003

Boyer, Paul S. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Bunge, Marcia, editor. *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.

Grant, Julia. *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Longmore, Paul K. and Lauri Umansky, editors. *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Melosh, Barbara. *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Murray, Thomas H. *The Worth of a Child*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Rapp, Rayna. *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Reinders, Hans S. *The Future of the Disabled in a Liberal Society*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000.

Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York : Pantheon Books, 1997.

Solinger, Rickie. *Beggars and Choosers: How The Politics Of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2001.