

Genetics: The New Frontier of Racism
Interview with Cochin Institute Director Alex Kahn

Alex Kahn is worried about genetics.

"It is a fact that genetics offers possibilities that can instrumentalize and generate new forms of racism," he said.

Kahn is director of the Cochin Institute of Molecular Genetics in Paris, and secretary of the European Life Science High Level Group, headquartered in Brussels, Belgium.

In this interview, Kahn confirms the warning given by the Holy See on the eve of the World Conference Against Racism, in the document "The Church in Face of Racism: For a More Fraternal Society."

At the invitation of UNESCO, which has organized a round table on "Genetics and Human Rights," Kahn is attending the U.N. summit on racism.

Q: How can the risk of new forms of racism related to genetics be described?

Kahn: The risk comes from what we define as sociobiology. What formerly was demonstrated through physical features, today is demonstrated through genes.

For example, even in important scientific journals studies have appeared that announced the discovery of the gene of intelligence, aggressiveness, love and such things, creating the expectation of an intervention in the genes that might change individual characteristics.

Apart from the fact that genes act in combination, that is, a single gene does not determine physical and psychic characteristics, it is evident that the danger exists of arriving at a concept of "genetically incorrect" persons or of establishing a "minimum quality" for children to be born. And this is monstrous.

Q: A real selection of race. In the draft of the Durban plan of action there is allusion to a genetic temptation that has never disappeared. At the beginning of the 20th century, the genetics movement was very popular in the Anglo-Saxon world, and it played an important part in the formulation of Nazi theories. Do you think that movement is reviving today?

Kahn: The root of everything is in the theory of evolution, or rather, the application of that theory to humanity, which defines different degrees of development according to evolution. Eugenics is the daughter of the latter, but eugenics is being transformed today.

If a century ago it was primarily concerned with avoiding the "spread" of poverty and of

certain sicknesses -- for example, through the control of births -- today it is directed to the elimination of certain genes in order to form human groups of better quality.

However, it should be clarified that this has nothing to do with science. It is ideology that uses science for its own ends.

Q: In any case, science has established that there are no biological differences that justify a theory of race.

Kahn: It's true, but today, for example, certain theories return in a new way, which force science. For example, it is reported that a chromosome associated with intelligence has been found in a certain region and that, in this same region, genes appear in a different way according to the ethnic group. Herein lies the "justification" of racism.

However, it must be clearly stated that science cannot be challenged to give an answer on racism. I will explain: to affirm that racism is illegitimate because in the biological plane, especially the genetic, races do not exist, means that if certain differences existed, racism would be justified.

Therefore, it is a contradiction to want to base anti-racism on science. There is no scientific definition for human dignity. This is a philosophical concept that antecedes science. In any event, I would like it if, together with the dangers caused by the genetic revolution, the great positive opportunities offered, for example, in the treatment of sicknesses, would be kept in mind.

Q: This leads us to speak of cloning, both reproductive as well as therapeutic. Today there is an appeal to scientific freedom for many experiments.

Kahn: There is no doubt that science needs freedom, but freedom also has its limits, derived from the freedom of individuals. For example, my freedom is limited by yours, which must also be guaranteed. Therefore, experiments that damage the freedom of persons are inadmissible. However, above all it is not up to science but to society to decide on the technical application of discoveries.

Q: It could be said that in cloning, the right of the person is not injured, it is simply created.

Kahn: It is not like that. Why is it that you and I at this moment can feel free while we talk? Because I have not chosen the color of your eyes, or hair, or your sex, just as your parents did not decide it for you.

This is why cloning, with the possibility of determining the physical and psychic characteristics of the unborn, is absolutely incompatible with freedom.