

Squelching moral debate

by [Stephen E. Lammers](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

This is a very good book, but not because it brings good news. John H. Evans, a sociologist at the University of California, San Diego, carefully documents how religious voices have been marginalized in the public debates over the human genome project. Evans documents as well how the absence of religious voices has made the public debates less rich. *Playing God?* should be read by anyone interested in the discussions of the human genome project and, more generally, in how religious voices and communities might participate in public debate, and what is likely to happen if they do not.

Evans is interested in what groups or professions control particular social domains. In brief, who is in charge of what? Evans's narrative begins in the 1970s, when the possibilities of the discoveries in genetics were only beginning to dawn upon scientists. He relates how scientists, who wished to be in charge, reported what they thought should be done and how they were chastised by theologians because of what the theologians perceived as hubris. As a consequence, scientists lost control of the public discussion of the human genome project.

Faced with the possibility that governmental regulatory bodies would constrain what scientists might do, scientists suggested that there should be governmental advisory bodies, which would not have the regulatory powers the scientists feared. Evans describes how, with the help of the bioethicists who were placed on these advisory commissions, scientists have regained control of the conversation surrounding the human genome project. The bioethicists and scientists use what Evans calls "formal rationality." They do not honor requests that substantive matters be discussed. As a result, there is no significant discussion of the purposes of the scientific research into the human genome--research often paid for, I might add, by taxpayer dollars. Legislators fear becoming embroiled in the issues and also worry that they do not have the expertise to engage in substantive discussion. So there is no further discussion.

Evans links the rise of bioethics as a professional discipline and the work of bioethicists on governmental commissions with the desire of scientists to find some way of avoiding scrutiny by theologians, who asked the hard questions about the purposes the scientists had. The upshot is that bioethicists "give cover" to the scientists and act as agents of the bureaucratic state through the governmental commissions on which they serve. In an irony that should not go unnoticed, one of the consequences is that not only religious voices but also the American public, through its elected representatives, has been excluded from the debates over the human genome project. As a society, we refer the important questions to governmental advisory commissions that are staffed by the scientists and bioethicists, and they in turn conduct a debate principally about means and not about the larger purposes genetic research might serve.

Evans ends his data collection in 1995, so he does not comment upon the most recent presidential commission on human stem cells. It would be interesting to know his views on this commission appointed by George W. Bush, because it is staffed not only by persons from the scientific and bioethics communities that Evans chastises, but also by persons who Evans sees as raising the kinds of substantive questions that need to be raised. This does not, of course, mean that Evans would agree with their conclusions.

It is ironic that a scholar who is not a theologian is the one who has done the most careful work up until now on the way in which the scientific and bioethics communities have joined forces to exclude religious voices. Although many of us have noticed and protested that religious voices are excluded from meaningful participation in these important public discussions, Evans shows how it took place.

Finally, it is important to note that Evans does not comment on the place of bioethicists in the clinical setting; his focus is their work on governmental advisory commissions. In order to understand their influence there, read this book. Then, if Evans has convinced you, prepare for the much harder task: turning the public debate to discussions of purpose.