

/ THE FIRST WORD

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REVIVAL MEETING

Revival. The word conjures up tent meetings by lamplight: hymns, crickets, and a sweating preacher—hellfire in shirtsleeves—stalking the narrow aisles between the bridge chairs.

Jeremy Rifkin lectures a little like that, without the perspiration. When possible, he shuns the podium, doffs his jacket, and talks—elegantly, urgently, and without notes—as he wanders through the room. He looks each listener in the eye and banters with the audience—even a hostile audience. The message is clear: “I’m one of you, not some self-anointed ‘expert’ handing down the word from on high; your worries are my worries; my worries should be yours.”

If the style is reassuring, the substance is not. Instead of fire and brimstone, he invokes a modern demonology: “mass genocide” (the extinctions of species); the specter of eugenics; the oil shortage; genocidal biowarfare (the only conceivable motive, he suggests obliquely, for the U.S. Department of Energy to have a hand in mapping the human genome); the concentration of capital (the end result of economies permitted by biotechnology); inefficient bureaucratization (the product of capital concentration).

At the heart of the sermon, though, is a theological conflict, between a “new sacralization” of life on the one hand, and a mechanistic school of “pure utility” on the other.

Bovine growth hormone (bGH) is the favorite devil of the moment. “I love bovine growth hormone,” Rifkin says. “It has no redeeming social value whatsoever.” Introduction of bGH, he says, will ruin thousands of dairy farms (a proposition by no means proven, and an effect difficult to measure in an industry highly subsidized by a government intent on preserving a production capacity—and a way of life—that far exceeds what demand will support). He suggests that ensuing changes in land use constitute an environmental impact of bGH—as though the one-crop commercial farm were an eternal natural ecosystem, rather than a new and local disturbance made possible by the steam locomotive and the refrigerator car.

Instead of damnation, Rifkin promises a national boycott of milk produced with the aid of bovine growth hormone.

Revival has another meaning, though, more in tune with the natural rhythm of the seasons than with the rousing periods of demagogic oratory. It is that regular resurgence of life and hope that comes with spring. And each spring, it seems, one’s own optimism for the future of the biotechnologies waxes a little stronger.

At the Association of Biotechnology Companies’ annual meeting (held in Washington at the beginning of April), a number of speakers—especially David Kingsbury, chairman of the Biotechnology Science Coordinating Committee, and Frank Young, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—urged those of us in industry to spread the good word about what biotechnology can do, and has done, for the public welfare. (And, in a marked revival of bureaucratic common sense, FDA will introduce a new category of compassionate approval for therapeutics that treat life-threatening conditions for which no alternative therapy exists. That is good news in its own right, for both biotech companies and patients who might not otherwise live through the usual approval process.)

Public perception of biotechnology is an issue on the same level of importance as regulation and international competitiveness. The prescription is simple: Talk to people. Get out into the churches, civic associations, and school auditoriums. Talk to reporters, distribute brochures, make videos. Speak, equal to equal, and let the people know what we can do for them. Forget, for the moment, the great theories—both the exciting science and the grandiose notions of historical development—and concentrate on specifics. More than half a dozen engineered therapeutics are on the market today. We long ago stopped counting the number of approved diagnostics (Young mentioned a figure of about 250). We can prevent hepatitis, cure some leukemias, detect cancers smaller than a pinhead, retard frost damage, kill crop-destroying pests without chemicals, and clean up festering pits of toxic waste. Surely the biotechnologies have something to offer citizens of all conditions.

This is good news. Let’s make sure it’s heard. —Douglas McCormick