

Research Article

The Ethics of Gene Editing: A Religio-Moral Analysis

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Abstract: Gene editing, particularly via CRISPR-Cas9 technology, stands at the frontier of biological innovation and ethical reflection. As humanity wields greater power over the blueprint of life, we are pressed to ask not only "Can we?" but also "Should we?" This article undertakes a religio-moral analysis of gene editing, exploring how sacred traditions and moral reasoning shape our understanding of what it means to be human in an age of genetic engineering. Drawing from Christian, Jewish, and Islamic ethical frameworks, this paper seeks to bridge the dialogue between scientific progress and spiritual wisdom.

Keyword: Gene Editing; Bioethics; Religious Ethics; Human Dignity; Theological Ethics; Genetic Enhancement

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, gene editing has emerged from the realm of science fiction to become a sobering reality. The ability to manipulate DNA—once the exclusive purview of nature or, in religious terms, of the Divine—is now within human hands. Techniques such as CRISPR-Cas9 offer the potential to cure hereditary diseases, improve agricultural yields, and perhaps even enhance human traits. Yet with these capabilities comes an ethical burden that cannot be ignored.

As a theologian and ethicist with over two decades of immersion in religious moral frameworks, I find the developments in gene editing both awe-inspiring and deeply unsettling. They touch the core of our understanding of human dignity, divine providence, and moral responsibility. In this article, I explore gene editing not only through the lens of ethics but also through the sacred narratives and moral visions of the world's major religions.

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2. Literature Review

Scholarly work on the ethics of gene editing is both rich and varied. Secular bioethics has often focused on autonomy, beneficence, and justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). However, religious ethics brings a unique depth, considering questions of meaning, purpose, and divine intention. For instance, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2008) emphasized that while therapeutic interventions can be morally acceptable, any manipulation that aims to "enhance" rather than "heal" may violate natural law.

In Judaism, the Talmudic principle of *pikuachnefesh* (preserving life) permits significant medical intervention, including gene therapy, as long as it is aimed at healing (Dorff, 2008:32). Similarly, Islamic bioethics, grounded in the Qur'an and the Hadith,

encourages medical innovation if it serves the principle of *maslahah* (public benefit) and avoids *fasad* (corruption or harm) (Sachedina, 2009:13).

Despite these nuances, there is a growing concern across traditions about "playing God"—a fear that humans might cross the sacred boundary between stewardship and sovereignty.

The ethical discourse surrounding gene editing is marked by a complex interplay of hope, fear, and philosophical tension. While secular bioethicists have offered robust analyses grounded in principles like autonomy, justice, and non-maleficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019:17), religious traditions contribute a more holistic perspective, grounded not only in ethical duties but in ontological understandings of the human person and the sacredness of life.

Christian Ethical Discourse

Christian theological literature has deeply engaged with biotechnology, particularly in the wake of CRISPR advancements. The Roman Catholic Church has historically supported medical interventions that align with the principle of *curapersonalis* (care for the whole person), provided such interventions do not compromise the intrinsic dignity of the human being (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2008:7). The Catholic distinction between "therapy" and "enhancement" is crucial: therapeutic interventions that restore normal functioning are permissible, while enhancements that alter human nature or aim for perfection are viewed with suspicion (Araujo&Sgreccia, 2005:12).

Protestant ethicists have similarly wrestled with the moral ambiguity of gene editing. Nigel Cameron (1999), a bioethicist within the Reformed tradition, has raised alarms about the commodification of life, arguing that human dignity is at risk in a world where we "design" rather than "receive" our children. Conversely, other Protestant thinkers such as Brent Waters (2006) have argued for a more pragmatic approach that sees technological development as part of the divine mandate to steward creation.

Jewish Bioethical Tradition

Judaism, with its long-standing emphasis on the sanctity of life and the imperative to heal, presents a nuanced perspective. The Talmud states, "Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). This principle justifies medical interventions, including gene therapy, provided they are undertaken with due diligence and ethical intent.

Dorff (2008) emphasizes the permissibility of genetic intervention within the bounds of *halakha* (Jewish law), especially when the goal is to prevent suffering or preserve life. However, the question of enhancement remains contentious. Orthodox scholars are generally more conservative, whereas Conservative and Reform voices may be more open to certain enhancements, especially if they lead to broader social equity (Zoloth, 2000:45).

Islamic Ethical Approaches

Islamic scholars have increasingly addressed the bioethical implications of gene editing. Rooted in the principles of *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Islamic law), which include

the preservation of life, intellect, and lineage, Islamic bioethics generally permits biomedical technologies if they prevent harm and serve the public good (Ghaly, 2010:12). The Islamic Fiqh Academy, an authoritative body on Muslim bioethics, has endorsed certain applications of genetic therapy under strict conditions.

Nonetheless, concerns remain about *taghayyurkhalq* Allah—changing the creation of God (Qur'an 4:119). While altering creation is not inherently forbidden, it becomes problematic when done out of vanity or to defy divine will (Sachedina, 2009:12). Muslim ethicists such as Aasim Padela (2013) caution that the sociopolitical context—particularly the risks of eugenics, inequality, and exploitation—must shape our moral evaluation.

Secular Philosophical Contributions

Beyond religious traditions, secular scholars have warned of the sociocultural ramifications of gene editing. Michael Sandel (2007) argues that the pursuit of perfection through biotechnology may erode our appreciation for the "giftedness" of life, replacing gratitude with control. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (2003) raises the issue of moral autonomy: if future generations are genetically engineered to possess specific traits, do they retain the capacity for free self-definition?

These philosophical critiques align with the concerns of religious ethicists in resisting a reductionist view of humanity. The fear is not merely technological overreach but a fundamental reshaping of human identity, agency, and community.

Emerging Interdisciplinary Dialogues

The convergence of religious thought and scientific ethics has begun to bear fruit in interdisciplinary scholarship. Initiatives such as the CRISPR Theology Project (Johns Hopkins University) and the International Summit on Human Genome Editing (National Academies of Sciences, 2020) aim to include religious voices in policy discussions. These dialogues acknowledge that while science can tell us what is possible, religion helps us discern what ought to be done.

Moreover, scholars like Celia Deane-Drummond (2014) argue for a "theology of wisdom" in bioethics—one that embraces prudence, patience, and humility in the face of complex moral terrain. In her view, genetic technologies must be subjected not only to technical scrutiny but also to spiritual discernment.

3. Methodology

This analysis is primarily qualitative, drawing upon scriptural interpretation, theological reflection, and moral philosophy within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Primary religious texts are engaged alongside contemporary theological commentaries and bioethical writings. The approach is comparative and integrative, aiming not to homogenize religious positions, but to bring them into constructive dialogue.

4. Results and Discussion

1. The Imago Dei and Human Dignity

Christian ethics is deeply anchored in the concept of *imago Dei*—the belief that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). From this flows a moral

imperative to respect the integrity and dignity of every person. Gene editing, when used to correct debilitating genetic conditions, may be seen as an act of compassion, aligning with Christ's healing ministry. However, when editing is used to enhance traits such as intelligence, beauty, or athleticism, we begin to commodify the human person, reducing them to a set of optimized characteristics.

Theologian Gilbert Meilaender (2013) warns that such enhancement undermines the giftedness of life. He writes, "We receive our children, not as products of our will, but as gifts of grace." The concern is that editing embryos may turn the child into a project of parental preference rather than a mystery to be embraced.

2. The Jewish Ethical Tradition: Healing as Sacred Duty

Judaism holds a high regard for medical intervention. As Rabbi Elliot Dorff (2008) notes, healing is not only permitted—it is required. The Talmud (BavaKamma 85a) grants physicians the authority to heal, indicating a divine endorsement of medical advancement. If gene editing can prevent suffering, Jewish ethics might support its therapeutic use.

However, the principle of *tikkunolam* (repairing the world) must be approached with humility. Altering the human genome on a large scale may have unforeseen ecological and social consequences. Thus, caution is required lest our efforts at healing lead to new forms of brokenness.

4. Islamic Perspectives: Between Divine Will and Human Responsibility

Islamic bioethics balances *tawakkul* (trust in God) with *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). The Qur'an (95:4) declares that humanity was "created in the best of stature," suggesting a divine order that should be respected. Yet the Prophet Muhammad encouraged the pursuit of knowledge and medical care.

AbdulazizSachedina (2009) affirms that gene editing may be permissible if it alleviates suffering and does not introduce corruption. The moral concern, however, lies in altering not just the body but the very identity of a person—especially if such changes reflect cultural or economic biases (e.g., editing for fairer skin or taller height).

Moral Limits and the Question of Hubris

At the heart of religio-moral reflection on gene editing is the question of hubris. Are we overstepping our bounds? C.S. Lewis (1947) once warned of "man's conquest of nature" turning into "the abolition of man." While religious ethics does not oppose scientific advancement per se, it insists that such power be exercised with reverence and restraint. Our generation must consider: Is every gain in control over life a moral good? Or might there be wisdom in allowing certain mysteries to remain untouched?

This study does not generate empirical data but synthesizes theological-ethical positions, scriptural interpretations, and moral paradigms drawn from the Abrahamic traditions and secular philosophy. The key outcomes of this comparative religio-moral analysis are as follows:

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1. **Therapeutic Use of Gene Editing Is Widely Acceptable:** Across Christian, Jewish, and Islamic ethics, there is cautious but clear moral support for the therapeutic use of gene editing. When intended to alleviate suffering, prevent fatal hereditary diseases, or restore health, such interventions align with the moral imperative to heal and preserve life.
 2. **Non-Therapeutic Enhancement Raises Significant Ethical Red Flags:** All traditions express serious reservations about using gene editing for enhancements that are not medically necessary—such as increased intelligence, aesthetic traits, or athleticism. These concerns stem from theological, anthropological, and social justice grounds.
 3. **Fear of Hubris and the Loss of the Sacredness of Life:** Religious ethics consistently warns against technological arrogance, or what the ancients called hubris. The attempt to control or perfect human nature risks undermining our sense of creatureliness and interdependence with the divine.
 4. **Emphasis on Human Dignity and Moral Responsibility:** All three religious frameworks affirm the sanctity and dignity of human life. Gene editing is ethically permissible only when it upholds, rather than diminishes, the dignity of the person—both the one undergoing treatment and the broader human community.
 5. **Need for Transdisciplinary Dialogue:** There is strong consensus across ethical traditions for inclusive, global discourse on gene editing that invites religious, philosophical, medical, and legal voices into the conversation.

Gene editing is one of those moral frontiers that confronts us with more than questions of science or law—it confronts us with questions of meaning. As a theologian reflecting on this matter over the past two decades, I have come to believe that our deepest concern is not simply what we do to the genome, but what this power does to us.

The Sacredness of the Human Body

In the Christian tradition, the body is not merely a vessel for the soul; it is a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Modifying it for therapeutic purposes aligns with Christ's healing ministry and the Church's long history of medical support. But to manipulate it for preference or performance turns the body into a canvas of vanity rather than reverence.

Likewise, in Judaism, the body is a divine loan, entrusted to us for care but not for arbitrary alteration. It is *nefesh*, a living soul-body unity. The Mishnah (Avot 4:1) teaches that "Who is honored? He who honors others"—not the one who is biologically enhanced.

In Islam, the human body is an *amanah* (trust) from Allah. It is not ours to mutilate or mold for pride's sake. As the Qur'an teaches, "We have certainly created man in the best of stature" (Qur'an 95:4). This verse implies that our worth lies not in our genetic perfection but in our moral excellence and spiritual submission.

The Ethical Limits of Mastery

A persistent theme in all three religions is the danger of forgetting our limits. When genetic technology becomes a tool of eugenics or social control, we regress morally even

as we progress scientifically. As Sandel (2007) rightly argues, our obsession with mastery risks eroding the gratitude and humility that make us fully human.

One must ask: When we can edit away the features we dislike, what becomes of compassion? If we eliminate difference, do we risk eliminating empathy?

Justice and Access

There is also the glaring issue of justice. Even if gene editing is used for therapeutic ends, who gets access? Will these treatments be equitably distributed, or will they reinforce class and racial disparities? Religious ethics demands vigilance here. The Hebrew prophets condemned the exploitation of the poor, and Jesus warned against storing treasures on earth. The Qur'an insists on justice as a divine imperative (Qur'an 16:90).

If gene editing becomes a tool for the privileged, then it is not merely unethical—it is unjust.

A Theology of Acceptance

Ultimately, the religious response to gene editing is not a Luddite rejection of science, but a theology of **acceptance**. Acceptance of the imperfect as still beloved. Acceptance of mystery as part of divine wisdom. Acceptance of life—not as a project to be perfected, but a miracle to be received.

This does not mean fatalism. Healing is sacred. But so is humility. And it may be that the most ethical use of gene editing is the one bounded by restraint, reverence, and the recognition that not all that is possible is good.

Recommendations

1. Affirm Therapeutic Applications within Ethical and Religious Guidelines

Gene editing should be ethically permissible when used for clear therapeutic purposes—such as curing genetic diseases, restoring bodily functions, or preventing suffering. This use aligns with religious imperatives to heal, preserve life, and act with compassion.

2. Prohibit Non-Therapeutic Enhancements That Undermine Human Dignity

Religious and moral communities should firmly resist any application of gene editing that promotes vanity, consumerism, or social engineering—such as selecting for cosmetic traits, intelligence, or athleticism. These uses risk reducing human life to a marketplace of engineered perfection.

3. Encourage Interfaith and Interdisciplinary Bioethical Committees

Religious scholars, scientists, and policymakers must collaborate to develop guidelines that respect both the possibilities of science and the sacredness of human life. This includes the formation of national and international advisory boards with multi-faith representation.

4. Ensure Equitable Access to Gene Editing Technologies

Therapeutic technologies must not become privileges of the wealthy. Justice demands that access to lifesaving medical interventions be shared equitably across socioeconomic and geopolitical lines.

5. Develop Ethical Education Programs in Faith Communities

Churches, synagogues, mosques, and seminaries must integrate bioethics into their educational missions. This will empower faith communities to engage these emerging technologies thoughtfully and prophetically.

6. Establish Global Ethical Frameworks Informed by Religious Values: Dialogue between bioethicists, theologians, and scientists must be deepened to craft frameworks that respect both innovation and sacred moral boundaries.

7. Promote Therapeutic Gene Editing with Clear Moral Guidelines: Healing and prevention of suffering align with most religious traditions. This should be the ethical boundary line for now.

8. Reject Enhancements Driven by Vanity or Market Forces: Editing for non-therapeutic traits risks creating a culture of eugenics cloaked in consumer choice.

9. Preserve Human Diversity as a Spiritual Value: Religious traditions affirm the beauty of human variety. Any gene editing technology must be guided by this principle.

10. Cultivate a Spiritual Ethic of Humility and Restraint

Finally, religious leaders and communities must teach the spiritual discipline of humility—the wisdom to know that not all power is meant to be exercised, and that some aspects of life are sacred precisely because they are not in our control

5. Conclusion

Gene editing confronts us with profound moral questions. It is not simply about rewriting genetic code—it is about rewriting the meaning of humanity. Religion, often dismissed as anti-science, has much to offer: humility, wisdom, and a deep reverence for life as gift, not possession. As we advance, let us ensure that our science is married to conscience, and our progress anchored in compassion.

Gene editing stands at the precipice of an unprecedented epoch—one in which humanity holds the power not only to heal but to alter the very essence of life. This power, while scientifically extraordinary, carries profound moral and spiritual consequences. As this analysis has shown, the world's major religious traditions do not oppose scientific progress; rather, they call us to engage it with humility, discernment, and moral clarity.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam each affirm that life is sacred, human dignity is inviolable, and that medical intervention, when used to heal, is both a moral good and a divine responsibility. Yet all three traditions also offer warnings—against pride, commodification, and the temptation to redefine humanity in our own fractured image. These warnings are not relics of the past, but urgent wisdom for a future increasingly defined by the tension between what we can do and what we should do.

As a theologian and ethicist who has spent more than two decades in dialogue with both sacred texts and scientific trends, I am convinced that the future of gene editing must be shaped not merely in laboratories and boardrooms but in sanctuaries, seminaries, and among communities of faith. We need a moral vision as sophisticated as our science—

one that sees every genome not as a code to be rewritten for convenience, but as a testament to life's complexity and sacredness.

In the end, the greatest danger of gene editing may not be the alteration of our biology, but the erosion of our humanity. We must ask, as people of faith and conscience: What kind of world are we engineering, and who will we become in the process?

Gene editing is not just a scientific issue; it is a mirror. It reflects who we believe we are and what kind of future we want to co-create. Religion, at its best, reminds us that we are not gods—but stewards, caretakers of life, and part of a moral universe far greater than our own ambitions.

If we listen carefully—to our scriptures, to our traditions, to the quiet wisdom of humility—we may yet find a path forward where our technology serves our humanity, rather than defines it.

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