



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

9th Dialogue on Science – October 13 – 15, 2010
in Engelberg, Switzerland

**Wolfgang van den Daele, Prof. em., Social Science Research
Center, Berlin, Germany**

Clashes of the Absolutes? Coping with Moral Conflicts in Genopolitics

Violation of interests cause frustration, violations of moral values cause outrage. Hence, moral zeal can make dangerous enemies, and moral conflicts can be particularly divisive. Is deliberative democracy suitable to forestall the escalation of moral conflict?

I will discuss how irreconcilable moral dispute over bioethical problems was dealt with in the deliberative setting of the German National Ethics Council (NER) 2001-2007. The dispute in the NER established what may be called “rational dissent”, which means that the members of the NER could not, despite good will, resolve the contested issues through arguments that relied on moral reasons which they all accepted. From an observer’s perspective such dissent indicates the existence of moral pluralism in the society. However, the participants of the conflict failed to agree on a common statement that acknowledges such pluralism – and, as a consequences, puts questions of tolerance and respect for the diverging moralities on the public agenda. They did agree that regulatory issues relating to the conflict must be decided by majority vote in parliament, which amounts to a half-way acceptance of the social fact of pluralism and concedes that democracy can trump moral principle.

Whether similar achievements can be expected from deliberations in other institutional settings, is questionable. There may be some hope if it can be clearly conveyed to the minority that through voting (or bargaining, for that matter) the distribution of regulatory power and interest is decided, not the defeat or victory of the competing moral values. In any case, deliberations commit even parties of bitter moral conflict to behavior of tolerance and respect – as long as the deliberations last.