

# Be Wary of Religious Opposition to RFID

While people have a right to their religious beliefs, invoking God to oppose RFID could hinder attempts to address privacy concerns in a rational way.

By Mark Roberti

Aug. 7, 2006—The *New York Times* ran a very interesting op-ed article last week about religious opposition to stem-cell research (registered users of the *Times* site, see [A Pox on Stem Cell Research](#)). Author Deborah Blum suggests that it is a mistake to allow the "moral structures of the moment" to stifle research into new medical techniques. This is a controversial topic that one could spend years debating, but Blum gives a solid example to support her views.

In her article, Blum explains that smallpox was killing tens of thousands of people a year in Europe when an English doctor, Edward Jenner, began studying why those exposed to the related but milder cowpox infection seemed to be immune to smallpox. Jenner did experiments using fluid from cowpox lesions to inoculate patients. Religious authorities viewed this as "dangerous and sinful," saying only God had the power to decide when life begins and ends, and that doctors should not try to intervene. Jenner responded by inoculating his son and then exposing him to smallpox to prove his ideas were of great benefit to humanity. His son did not get infected, but newspapers ridiculed Jenner.

What's this got to do with RFID? Maybe nothing...maybe a lot. Katherine Albrecht, the founder of Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering (CASPIAN), opposes RFID because she says it represents the Mark of the Beast. "When I was eight years old, my grandmother sat me down after a visit to a grocery store and told me that there will be a time when people will not be able to buy or sell food without a number, referring to the Mark of the Beast, *Revelations xiii*," she was quoted as saying back in 2003. "I made a promise to myself, at eight years old, that if there was ever a number to buy or sell food, I would stop what I was doing and fight it."

More recently, she told C/Net: "My goal as a Christian (is) to sound the alarm." A version of her book opposing RFID is titled, *The Spychips Threat: Why Christians Should Resist RFID and Electronic Surveillance*.

Albrecht has every right to oppose RFID on religious grounds, but her views raise the question of whether she is hyping privacy concerns to achieve her religious goals. My guess is she would say she cares about both—preventing the end of the world and preventing the invasion of privacy. My point here, though, is that while individuals have the right to reject a new technology and even campaign against it, societies should be wary about banning technologies for religious reasons.

The C/Net article points out that some people raised concerns about the end of the world being triggered by the Y2K software issue, bar codes, Social Security numbers and even the Gutenberg press. It quotes Albrecht as saying, "I'd like to think I'd be speaking out against them, too, if I was around at the time they were introduced."

And therein lies the problem. None of those things led to the apocalypse. All—with the exception of the Y2K problem, of course—created benefits for companies and individuals. The Gutenberg press transformed the world by taking information out of the hands of an elite few and making it available to everyone. Bar codes and Social Security numbers have had less of an impact, but bar codes have made businesses more efficient and goods cheaper. Millions rely upon the Social Security system in the United States in their retirement years.

The press and policy makers need to separate religious-driven opposition to RFID from questions about how RFID should be used and how individual privacy should be protected. Failure to do so, the *Times* article shows, will likely lead to restrictions on a technology that has myriad benefits for consumers and businesses alike.

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