

Cloning Adam's Rib:

A PRIMER ON RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO CLONING

*A report prepared for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life
by John H. Evans of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., and
the Department of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego*

INTRODUCTION

The birth of a cloned sheep in Scotland in 1997 focused global attention on the reality of reproductive cloning and sparked speculation about its future uses. Many religious Americans believe that their faith traditions and teachings can critically inform our decision making process about whether to engage in human cloning.

Given recent scientific advances, as well as the high political profile of bioethics issues in the past year, it is important to understand the moral and ethical implications of cloning. President Bush has appointed a Council on Bioethics to specifically consider these moral and ethical issues. At the same time, a major scientific authority – the National Academy of Science – issued a unanimous recommendation in January, 2002, to temporarily ban the cloning of humans, while still expressing strong support for the use of cloned embryos to produce stem cells for research. Human cloning is a policy issue begging for moral elucidation and plenty of religious voices and traditions are willing to oblige.

THE RECENT HISTORY OF HUMAN CLONING RESEARCH

The successful cloning of frogs in the early 1970s opened the door to debate among theologians and others on the morality of human cloning. The relatively simple procedure of cloning a frog, as opposed to cloning a mammal, however, rendered this conversation abstract, and discussion cooled after a few years.¹ The debate was reinvigorated in the late 1990s when, after many failed attempts at animal cloning, Dolly the sheep was finally cloned. The successful cloning of other animals followed in quick succession.

While the scientist who created Dolly condemned the idea of trying to clone a human, advocates of human cloning soon appeared. The first notable advocate was Richard Seed, a retired Chicago physicist who claimed he was setting up a laboratory to engage in human cloning. It appears that he did not have the requisite expertise to achieve the feat, because little was heard from him after his

announcement. More recently two groups have appeared with plans to engage in human reproductive cloning. The first, called Clonaid, is associated with a religion that believes in space aliens, and seems to have trained scientists in its employ. The second is led by an Italian fertility doctor and an American reproduction specialist, both of whom have demonstrated ability in their respective areas.

These announced efforts to clone humans, and an improvement in the technology, have created the new wave of attention to the human cloning issue. Claims by credible scientists that the technique is possible, albeit still dangerous, have prompted new calls for federal regulation.

Reproductive and Therapeutic Cloning

It is important to make a distinction at the outset between two types of cloning: “reproductive” cloning and “therapeutic” cloning. Somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) is the baseline technology for both. SCNT involves removing the DNA from a cell of an adult, placing it into an egg which has had its nucleus extracted, and inducing the egg to grow into an embryo. “Reproductive cloning,” is then the implantation of an embryo created through SCNT into a woman’s uterus with the intention of producing a baby. This is what most people think the cloning debate is about, creating “copies” of adults. It is supported by some who believe it holds potential for infertile couples.

“Therapeutic” cloning is the use of SCNT to create embryos, but not implanting those embryos in women to grow into babies. (The term “therapeutic” is somewhat of a misnomer since its therapeutic efficacy has not been demonstrated. In addition, opponents of embryonic stem cell research argue that the research is not at all therapeutic for the embryo, which is destroyed in the process.) Instead these cloned embryos would have their stem cells extracted for use in medical therapies. Scientists think that embryonic stem cells are capable of turning into almost any type of cell in the body, and hope that they can eventually be used to treat diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and kidney

failure. Using stem cells derived from an embryo, which is itself a clone of the ultimate recipient, is thought to possibly reduce the risk of organ rejection that often occurs in the bodies of transplant recipients. If this is true, then stem cells from cloned embryos would be superior to stem cells obtained from other sources, such as left over embryos stored at IVF clinics.

Since the retrieval of embryonic stem cells destroys the embryo, the familiar ethical debates over abortion and embryo experimentation are often applied to this aspect of stem cell research. Little is explicitly written about creating embryonic stem cells through cloning, so we must instead rely upon what has been written about the more general case of purposefully creating embryos in order to obtain their stem cells. This should give us a strong sense of what religious communities might conclude about “therapeutic” cloning.

PROPOSED CLONING LEGISLATION

Although many bills related to cloning have been introduced in this Congress, two bills have received most of the consideration. The first is the “Cloning Prohibition Act of 2001” (HR2172) introduced by Representative Greenwood. The key provision in the bill is that it outlaws “reproductive” cloning, making it unlawful for anyone to “use or attempt to use human somatic cell nuclear transfer technology with the intent to initiate a pregnancy.” The law would expire 10 years after its enactment.

The second bill is titled the “Human Cloning Prohibition Act of 2001” (S.790/HR1644). The lead sponsors in the Senate are Senators Sam Brownback, Chris Bond and Bob Smith. In the House the lead sponsors are Curt Weldon and Bart Stupak. The key provision here is that the bill makes illegal any public or private effort to introduce “the nuclear material of a human somatic cell into a fertilized or unfertilized oocyte whose nucleus has been removed or inactivated to produce a living organism (at any stage of development) with a human or predominantly human genetic constitution.”

The difference between the two bills is that while both would ban reproductive cloning, the second prohibits therapeutic cloning as well. The sponsors of the latter bill present two justifications also banning therapeutic cloning. First, referencing the debate about the morality of using embryonic stem cells from any source, the bill states that many people are opposed to the creation of “new human life solely to be exploited and destroyed in this way.” In addition, they are concerned that once scientists create cloned embryos, it will be extremely difficult as a practical matter to stop these embryos from being implanted in women.

The more comprehensive cloning ban – H.R. 1644 – passed the House of Representatives on July 31, 2001 by a vote of 265 to 162. President Bush has promised to sign the legislation if it comes to his desk. However, the debate will soon become more complicated in the Senate, as Senator Tom Harkin is preparing to introduce legislation that would ban only reproductive cloning.

RELIGIOUS STATEMENTS ON CLONING

As a generalization, it can safely be said that almost every organized religious group that has officially spoken on reproductive cloning has condemned it, at a minimum because it is currently unsafe. However, the bills currently under consideration in Congress ban cloning regardless of whether it is later determined to be safe or unsafe, so the more important question is the various religious views of the ethics of cloning beyond mere safety concerns.

Roman Catholicism

It is easiest to start with the most clear-cut positions, those that oppose both therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning. The most well known of these is the position held by the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. It is clear-cut because it is not based upon any additional information about the intentions of those doing the cloning, the unknown effects of being cloned on the clone itself,

possible effects on social institutions, and the like. Rather, the Roman Catholic Church is opposed to therapeutic cloning because of the Church's position on the moral status of embryos. Embryos are to be treated the same as born persons, and therefore cannot be used as means toward an end. Most obviously, they cannot be destroyed to benefit others. Even if a cloned embryo could be created without killing other embryos, which is unlikely, the Catholic Church would still be opposed to reproductive cloning, as it is to many reproductive techniques, because it severs human reproduction from sexuality.²

There is a range of positions held by Roman Catholic theologians on these issues, who generally take a more "liberal" stance than the leadership. Some theologians offer different or additional reasons for opposition to reproductive cloning, such as the argument that it could lead to greater injustice in the world.³ Others have challenged the leadership's position on embryo research, arguing for a return to an earlier Catholic position where the personhood of an embryo was not considered to be established until later in development.⁴

Protestantism

Similarly, the official statements of evangelical Protestant denominations uniformly condemn both reproductive and therapeutic cloning. The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 2001 almost identical in its reasoning to the Brownback bill before the Senate. The resolution listed concerns about the safety of cloning, the destruction of human embryos for research purposes, and the belief that cloning turns procreation into manufacture.⁵ A statement from the Office of the President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, as well as the statements of evangelical-oriented interest groups – such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America – oppose both sorts of cloning on similar grounds.⁶

While stated concerns about therapeutic cloning seem to be directly taken from arguments in the abortion debate, the concerns that evangelical leaders express about reproductive cloning resemble the arguments of one of the most articulate

and visible evangelical opponents of cloning, Gilbert Meilaender.⁷ In testimony before the National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) in 1997, Meilaender argued that cloning would result in children who were “made,” not “begotten.”⁸ By this he means that if children are considered to be instruments of our will, as our projects, instead of equal partners with ourselves in humanity, then they are “made.” “Begotten” is what he considers the preferred relationship between parents and children. “Begotten” is the relationship of the Son – Jesus – to the Father in the Nicene creed. It is the term chosen to indicate that Jesus was not “made” (that is, not subsidiary to God), but equal to God. Meilaender locates this concern with “making” children within the Biblically mandated relationship of marriage.

While the arguments for opposing both types of cloning vary within evangelical theological circles, there are no visible evangelicals who stray from the basic stance of opposing cloning.

Moving from the core of evangelicalism toward denominations that are typically more mainline on these types of issues, some interesting positions can be found. Public opinion data show that members of the United Methodist Church are, with the members of the American Baptists Churches, the most “conservative” of the mainline Protestants. The United Methodist Church therefore often finds itself adhering to the middle of any particular controversy. In this case the United Methodist Church comes down against both kinds of cloning, but for reasons that reflect concerns from across the political spectrum. They are concerned with “embryo wastage” and the “tearing of the fabric of the family” – usually “conservative” concerns – but also with the “use or abuse of people, exploitation of women, . . . the compromising of human distinctiveness, the lessening of genetic diversity, the direction of research and development being controlled by corporate profit and/or personal gain, and the invasion of privacy.”⁹ Therefore, the Methodists, who have been studying issues of human genetics since the late 1980s, are opposed to both therapeutic and reproductive cloning. This denomination is also officially in favor of legal abortion, a fact that

demonstrates that while the cloning debate is related to the abortion debate, it cannot be reduced to it.

At the more liberal end of the Protestant spectrum, we find that the most liberal of these denominations make a distinction between reproductive and therapeutic cloning. Studies of the clergy and laity of the United Church of Christ consistently show that this is the most liberal of the Christian denominations, and its Committee on Genetics looked at the reproductive cloning issue through the lens of justice.¹⁰ While they have “empathy with couples who might seek cloning in order to have children ‘of their own,’” they oppose cloning “and say ‘enough’ to technologies that are privileges of the rich in the Western world.” “When the world groans with hunger, when children are stunted from chronic malnutrition, when people die of famine by the thousands every day . . . the development of any more technologies to suit the desires of those who are relatively privileged, secure, and comfortable seems to fly in the face of fundamental claims of justice.”¹¹

It is with therapeutic cloning that the waters get a bit muddy for explaining the position of liberal Protestants. Continuing with the United Church of Christ, the committee described above does not “object categorically to . . . research that produces and studies cloned human pre-embryos through the 14th day of fetal development, provided the research is well justified in terms of its objectives, that the research protocols show proper respect for the pre-embryos, and that they not be implanted.”¹² Reflecting their concern with relieving the suffering caused by diseases, as well as their long-standing position that embryos do not have the same status as born persons, the UCC General Synod in 2001 passed a resolution supporting embryonic stem cell research conducted on embryos donated from IVF clinics.¹³ This resolution does not address the creation of embryos for research purposes, which would be the case with therapeutic cloning.

The statements of the Presbyterian Church (USA) do not provide definitive guidance on either cloning issue. While the church has never affirmed the

practice of human cloning for either reproductive or therapeutic purposes, they do support embryonic stem cell research. In their General Assembly in 2001, they issued a statement of support for embryonic stem cell research using embryos from IVF clinics.¹⁴ Although the statement did not touch upon intentionally creating embryos for research purposes, a 1983 statement discouraged the development of human embryos “except in those cases of clearly demonstrable benefit where no other substitute could accomplish this same end.”¹⁵

Islam

Islam is one of the fastest growing religious communities in the United States, but, as with other faith traditions that encompass numerous branches and schools of thought, generalizations about Islamic positions are quite hazardous. Still, according to Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina, in a wide-ranging review of different schools of thought within Islam, the Islamic assessment of reproductive cloning focuses on the effect this technology might have on familial relationships. If human cloning occurs “within the lawful male-female relationship to help infertility,” it may be permissible, but would require the “spiritual and moral connection between a man and a woman.”¹⁶ Therapeutic cloning seems even more permissible. The debate within Islam is whether an embryo has moral status at 40 days or 120 days. Since therapeutic cloning uses earlier embryos, it does not pose the same ethical problems.¹⁷

However, Professor Sachedina has indicated that opinion among Islamic leaders has been turning against even these morally permissible types of cloning on distributive justice grounds not unlike those articulated by the United Church of Christ: “In view of limited resources in the Islamic world and the expensive technology that is needed for research related to cloning, Muslim legists have asked their governments to ban research on cloning at this time.”¹⁸

Judaism

The positions of Jewish communities regarding human cloning are also extremely difficult to summarize. This is not simply due to the range of movements within

the larger tradition, or to the fact that there are no universally recognized authorities within Judaism as there are in some Christian traditions, but also to the lack of any relevant established principle throughout Judaism with which to judge cloning. According to an earlier review of Jewish perspectives on cloning, “The prospects of human cloning elicit ambivalence but seldom explicit condemnation in Jewish scholarship.”¹⁹

On the one hand, the healing of suffering from disease is a strong imperative in the Jewish tradition, based upon the view that humans are co-creators with God in the ongoing development and perfection of the world. Therefore, there are Jewish theologians and jurists who would support reproductive cloning under the condition that it relieve suffering in some way. An example might be the cloning of a child who has kidney damage to create another child who could then become a kidney donor.²⁰

Although most of the criticisms of reproductive cloning within Judaism are not apropos to the differences between the two cloning bills currently before Congress, one example can give a sense of the debate. Some have raised the question of how reproductive cloning might affect the clone’s family status. That is, would a clone of an adult be their child or sibling? As two scholars of Judaism see it, “the spirit of Judaism is not comfortable with fertility techniques which are effected via the combination of different men and women who do not themselves represent organic family nuclei, or with the technology of cloning which involves no sexual union, particularly because of the many problems which such technology can raise.”²¹

On the other hand, Rabbi Michael Broyde summarizes the Jewish perspective on reproductive cloning differently: “In sum, one is inclined to state that halacha views cloning as far less than the ideal way to reproduce people; however, when no other method is available it would appear that Jewish law accepts that having children through cloning is perhaps a mitzvah [blessing] in a number of circumstances and is morally neutral in a number of other circumstances.”²²

As much as we can claim a “Jewish position” on therapeutic cloning, it would be in support, due to the Jewish theological belief in the necessity of healing disease and relieving suffering. While Christians share this concern, many feel it is outweighed by the unacceptable destruction of embryos. However, unlike Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants, but like many mainline Protestants and Muslims, Jews have a developmental approach to fetal life. In the Jewish tradition a fetus has no status during the first 40 days. More to the point, an embryo existing outside of a woman has no legal status in the Jewish tradition.²³ Therefore, there is no intrinsic objection to embryo research.

In somewhat rare unanimity on bioethical matters, groups representing congregations in the Orthodox and Reform traditions have publicly called for research on embryonic stem cells derived from excess embryos from IVF clinics.²⁴ The groups representing these movements have not made statements about the somewhat different issue of creating embryos for research purposes, although some Jewish ethicists have commented on the issue. For example, Rabbi Moses Tendler, who is a professor of medical ethics and biology at Yeshiva University, argues that a ban on therapeutic cloning would be “a travesty of justice launched on humanity” because this technique “is clearly the best hope that man has for curing disease.”²⁵

CONCLUSION

What is distinctive about religious contributions to this public debate? While most religious arguments can be translated to secular language – albeit at the cost of some loss in precision – the debate about cloning offers evidence that a public debate involving religious groups considers a broader range of values and concerns than a secular debate would. Some commentators have noted that this religious debate “is richer and more substantive than the perspectives of autonomy, risk benefit or commerce – discourse to which policy-makers and researchers are attuned.”²⁶

Consider, as an example of a limited discussion, the debate at a recent National Academy of Sciences meeting where two scientific teams defended their decision to proceed with human cloning. The debate was between two groups, one arguing that cloning was a reproductive right and one arguing that it was not safe. Religious communities engaged in this debate, while concerned about safety and reproductive autonomy, raise deeper concerns about the purpose and limits of scientific research – a debate not often welcomed by scientists themselves who often articulate the view that the public should not interfere with what they perceive to be solely scientific questions.²⁷ For example, while the language is different in each tradition, debates about the extent to which we are “co-creators” with God (or “created co-creators,” etc.) allows for a public discussion of what the goals of scientific research should be. Surely it is better to decide upon our destination before we pick a path.

On an issue as new as human cloning, one normative position seems clear: we should consider as many perspectives as possible. Given the thousands of years of ethical reflection embedded in the religious traditions in the U.S., these traditions can offer insights, even to those who do not share the particular premises. Whatever conclusion we as a society reach, we will be more confident that we have reached the correct conclusion if we have at least considered these diverse views. It is perhaps the diversity found in these ancient traditions that are the greatest contribution of the religious communities to this debate.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a history of the debates in this era, see my book *Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethics*. (University of Chicago Press, 2002), Chapter 2. Some original sources in the debate include Ramsey (1970), Fletcher (1971) and Watson (1971).

² Campbell, Courtney S. and Joan Woolfrey. 1998. "Norms and Narratives: Religious Reflections on the Human Cloning Controversy." *Journal of Biolaw and Business* 1(3):820.

³ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. 2001. "Cloning and Sin: A Niebuhrian Analysis and a Catholic, Liberationist Response." Pp. 97110 in *Beyond Cloning: Religion and the Remaking of Humanity*, edited by Ronald Cole-Turner. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

⁴ Farley, Margaret. 2000. "Testimony of Margaret A. Farley, Ph.D." In *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research: Volume III, Religious Perspectives*. Rockville, MD: National Bioethics Advisory Commission.

⁵ "Resolution No. 2 on Human Cloning." Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting. Available at <http://sbcannualmeeting.org/sbc01/sbcresolution.asp?ID=2>

⁶ "Human Cloning: A Temptation to Avoid." Available at: <http://www.lcms.org/president/statements/cloning.asp>. The Concerned Women for America have released a statement on embryonic stem cell research that would definitely preclude therapeutic cloning as "ethically wrong treatment of the tiniest of humans," and would presumably preclude reproductive cloning because of the destruction of embryos that would be required to develop the technique. See http://www.cwfa.org/library/life/2000-05_pp_stem-cell.shtml. Focus on the Family makes a similar argument, that ESCR means that one human being must be killed for another. See <http://www.family.org/docstudy/excerpts/A0014318.html>

⁷ I have no definitive proof of causal influence here. I do suspect that those who drafted these resolutions relied upon Meilaender's writings.

⁸ Meilaender, Gilbert. 1997. "Begetting and Cloning." *First Things*, June/July, 4143.

⁹ "Text of : 30530-CS-NonDis-0" General Conference 2000. Available at <http://www.gc2000.org/pets/pet/text/p30530.asp>

¹⁰ This committee was appointed by the Board of Homeland Ministries, but does not speak for the church (Cole-Turner 1997: 147).

¹¹ Cole-Turner, Ronald. 1997. *Human Cloning: Religious Responses*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ "Support for federally funded research on embryonic stem cells" General Synod 2001. Available at: <http://www.ucc.org/synod/resolutions/res30.htm>

¹⁴ See: "Attachment A: Statement on the Ethical and Moral Implications of Stem Cell and Fetal Tissue Research." Available at: <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/actions-of-213.htm#attachment>. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a coalition of mainline Protestant, Jewish and other faith groups, passed a resolution that was an almost exact copy of the Presbyterian statement. See: <http://www.rerc.org/new/stemcellboardstatement.htm>

¹⁵ "Presbyterians vote in favor of fetal, embryonic, and stem cell research." [Http://www.eurekaalert.org/releases/srn-pvf061501.html](http://www.eurekaalert.org/releases/srn-pvf061501.html)

¹⁶ Sachedina, Abdulaziz. 1998. "Human Clones: An Islamic View." In *The Human Cloning Debate*, edited by Glenn McGee. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books.

¹⁷ This claim was made in an earlier Pew Forum. See “Human Cloning: Religious Perspectives,” available at [wysiwyg://13/http://pewforum.org/events/0503/](http://www.pewforum.org/events/0503/). For additional writings by Professor Sachedina, see his contribution to “Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research: Volume III Religious Perspectives” (2000) and “Islamic Perspectives on Cloning” (<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~aas/issues/cloning.htm>), as well as (Sachedina 1998).

¹⁸ Sachedina, 1998.

¹⁹ Campbell and Woolfrey, 1998.

²⁰ Cohen, Jonathan R. 1999. “In God’s Garden: Creation and Cloning in Jewish Thought.” *Hastings Center Report* 29(4): 712.

²¹ Due to the Holocaust, an additional concern for the Jewish community is any reproductive technology that seems to have eugenic intentions. While some advocates of cloning have given non-eugenic motivations, such as wanting to create a child to be a bone marrow donor, many of the popular statements about cloning assume it will be used to create humans with more desirable qualities, which is eugenics.

²² “Cloning People and Jewish Law: A Preliminary Analysis.” Rabbi Michael J. Broyde. Available at: <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Judaism/clonel.html>

²³ Dorff, Elliot N. 2000. “Testimony of Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, Ph.D.” In *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research: Volume III, Religious Perspectives*. Rockville, MD: National Bioethics Advisory Commission.

²⁴ “Letter to President Bush,” Institute for Public Affairs, Orthodox Union, and the Rabbinical Council of America. Available at <http://www.ou.org/public/statements/2001/nate34.htm>. “Reform Jewish Leaders Urge Bush to Promote Embryonic Stem Cell Research” Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism. Available at <http://www.rac.org.news/071601.html>. “AJCongress, Declaring it ‘Imperative’ to Permit Embryonic Stem Cell Research to Save Lives, Urges Bush not to Delay Approval of Federal Funding” Available at: http://ajcongress.org/pages/RELS2001/JUL_2001/jul01_01.htm

²⁵ As stated in the Pew Forum event on cloning, May 3, 2001. See: [wysiwyg://13/http://pewforum.org/events/0503/](http://www.pewforum.org/events/0503/). He makes a similar claim in his testimony before the NBAC. See (Tendler 2000: H-4).

²⁶ Campbell and Woolfrey, 1998.

²⁷ Evans, John H. 2002. *Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethical Debate*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.