

## Human Cloning - *A battle worth fighting?*

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**Helen Barratt** updates us and asks what it means to be human

Earlier this year, at a meeting organised in London by the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship, Professor Nigel Cameron presented a refreshing view of the Christian perspective of the cloning debate. Professor Cameron is currently executive chair of the Centre for Bioethics in Public Policy in the UK and he is founder of the Christian journal *Ethics & Medicine*. However, he has made his mark in the US where he is regarded as one of the country's leading bioethicists - what he considers to be the most secular discipline in North America.

Human cloning is regarded by many commentators as the most important issue we will face this decade and it has been hotly debated in the world's media over the summer. Nigel Cameron has already spoken at two US congressional hearings on cloning this year, arguing that experimenting on human embryos is patently immoral. He also testified to a Senate subcommittee in Washington on the day of the recent US House of Representatives vote.[1] Following much discussion, the House voted on 31 July to ban the use of cloning technology in medical research. The Human Cloning Prohibition Act was passed by a 265 to 16 margin.

The technique in question, known as human or reproductive cloning, involves the creation of a genetically identical individual. It is distinct from therapeutic cloning, which involves the creation of new tissue for medical and research purposes from cloned stem cells. If the Act, which currently makes no distinction between the practices, were to become law, it would criminally outlaw human cloning, penalising offenders with up to ten years in jail.[2]

Less than a week after the vote, controversial Italian embryologist Severino Antinori made a speech at the National Academy of Scientists in Washington. Dr Antinori, director of the International Associated Research Institute in Italy, said that he would employ the same techniques that were used to produce the first cloned animal, Dolly the sheep. He claims that 1,300 couples in the US and 200 in Italy are potential candidates for his research, including 'three or four' British couples. He plans to start cloning embryos in November of this year.[3]

Antinori, who describes himself as the Galileo of the 21 century,[4] provoked outrage amongst the conference delegates, saying that his work is 'very important to humanity' and labelling the Pope, who is one of his fiercest critics, a 'criminal'. He was supported by Panayiotis Zavos, professor of reproductive physiology at the University of Kentucky who also announced his intention to begin cloning a human by the end of the year. The two men sat on the stage with Brigitte Boisselier, the scientific director of Clonaid, which advertises cloning services on its website for fees starting at \$200,000 (£140,000). The company was founded in 1997 by a French racing car driver who changed his name to Rael and started the Raelian Movement, which claims that life on Earth was created by extraterrestrial scientists.

The trio faced heavy criticism from other scientists and the moral outrage in the media was almost universal. Rudolf Jaenisch of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology described them as irresponsible and claimed that the necessary methods do not yet exist. He said, 'At present, there is no way to predict whether a given clone will develop into a normal or abnormal individual.'[5] Prof Jack Scarisbick, national director of the UK

based pro-life organisation, Life, condemned Antinori's plans as 'morally quite unacceptable'. He described him as 'the unacceptable face of modern medicine' and said 'the sooner he is run out of town, the better'.<sup>[6]</sup>

## The Political Response

The United Nations general assembly is expected to start an urgent debate about a worldwide human cloning ban following a joint petition from Germany and France. The governments in Berlin and Paris reacted strongly to Antinori's speech in Washington as the experiment defies recent condemnation of the practice by the European parliament, the World Health Organisation and the Vatican, as well as a UN resolution which described human cloning as 'contrary to human dignity'. Earlier this year German chancellor Gerhard Schroder expressed concerns that banning the technique would hinder the growth of the country's biotech sector. However Germany is particularly conservative in its approach to biotechnological research in the light of Nazi atrocities during World War II. It has banned all research on human embryos since 1990.<sup>[7]</sup>

President George Bush has added further fuel to the fire since the petition to the UN by going back on a campaign promise to ban the scientific use of human embryos. Following what many consider to be one of the most important decisions of his presidency so far, President Bush gave the go-ahead for limited medical research in the US on stem cells taken from human embryos. He said that federal funds should be used only for research with cell lines from embryos that had already been developed by scientists, but not any further cells taken from new embryos. The existing cell lines have been created in privately funded research and the legislation will not affect future work carried out in the private sector. Bush described the issue as 'one of the most profound of our time' and added: 'I have given this issue a great deal of thought and prayer.'<sup>[8]</sup>

## A Challenge to Christians

The Bible makes it clear that humans are created in God's likeness<sup>[9]</sup> but nowhere does it spell out exactly what is meant by the 'image of God'. However, its root lies in man's being - human beings modelled in creation on the very 'likeness' of the being of God.<sup>[10]</sup> The extraordinary dignity and sanctity that this imparts are both at our very core. The strongest evidence of the special value which God places on us is seen in the coming of Christ to die on the cross and, in the process, to take our own humanity to himself. Through this alone can we ascertain the worth of our race in God's eyes and come to the conclusion that human life must surely be respected and individuals should not be used as a means to an end. The implications of ignoring this are emphasised later in Genesis when God tells Noah and his family that 'to kill a man is to kill one made like God'.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to Cameron, the issues raised by the cloning debate that now face society are those regarding the nature of life, as well as what it means to be human. In his talk, he urged Christians to consider how we can remain true to human dignity in a fallen world and, on the basis of this, what it now means for us to be human in the 21 st century.

He feels strongly that the abortion debate has overshadowed this last question for the past 30 years and has attracted all our attention in recent times. In the late 20 th century the issues facing bioethicists, such as abortion and euthanasia, were those of when to take life. This has led to problems because the abortion argument has been one of choice and rights and, by focusing on this, the church has avoided tackling the issue raised in Genesis of what it means to bear the image of God. However, when to make life - the major question of the 21 st century - now provides us with what Cameron describes as 'a remarkable opportunity to refocus our thinking'.

## An Intuitive Visceral Response

The attitude to human cloning amongst the general public has been almost universally negative. As one secular commentator wrote, 'Call it "the yuck factor". The idea of replicating humans upsets deep-seated convictions about the nature of humanity.'[12] Cameron asks whether or not this is a 'test case', provided by God to allow society to get to grips with the implications of biotechnology. He is adamant that future issues will prove more complex. This was also the warning of Bill Joy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, regarded by many as a secular prophet, who predicted that the three threats to humanity in the 21 st century would be genetics, nanotechnology and robotics.[13]

A journalist writing in the Vancouver Sun said: 'Cloning is like art: We don't know much about it but we know what we don't like.'[14] It is clear that the public at large know almost intuitively that human cloning is wrong but cannot explain why. However, by returning to our creation in God's image, we as Christians have some idea as to why the use of the technique challenges our intrinsic dignity and is therefore our visceral response.

Another question we must also address is what procreation actually is. The natural genetic process is a divine lottery and this, Cameron feels, goes some way to helping us to define our dignity. Each individual is truly unique in both their genetic makeup and personhood. Human dignity can only be preserved by distancing intent from outcome. He argues that by replacing this process we will not only end up devaluing life and all that this entails but we would also be placing power in the hands of those who will use it and abuse it.

Many arguments have been put forward against cloning by both Christian and non-Christian observers. Not least of these concerns is the potential emotional damage to the child. What will happen to the child born to replace a brother or sister killed in tragic accident? What will happen when the child born to infertile parents grows up and its mother realises that this is not really her child but her brother in law, her partner's twin? These examples alone reveal the fundamental indignity at the heart of the cloning process. Whilst several humanitarian arguments are postulated by the pro-cloning lobby, many people want to be cloned but few actually want to be one.

## New Opportunities

The situation in the US is complex because the pro-life lobby is powerful but does not run the show. However it has come to light recently that in fact the debate is leading to the formation of a new and unique political alliance. The vote in August saw an unlikely coming together of staunch conservatives, who traditionally take a hard line on such matters, with socialists. This has been noted by a number of journalists including the columnist EJ Dionne Jr writing in the Washington Post. Dionne Jr felt that for many Democrats this was merely an issue regarding 'concerns about the long-term goals of an increasingly powerful and profit-motivated biotechnology industry'.[15] However it is clear that the intrinsic dignity of human life strikes a chord across the political divide and presents us with a remarkable opportunity. Cameron anticipates that in the long run Christians will find themselves with surprising friends as left-wing liberals, our traditional opposition on pro-life issues, are suddenly very opposed to this use of technology. This emerging example of co-belligerence - temporarily shelving traditional differences for the sake of one issue - has the potential to lead to a very powerful alliance as our new allies have the ear of influential individuals in a way we could never hope. Although it is vital that we never compromise the gospel, we must tap into this potential by expressing the truth clearly in a way that stirs the hearts of non-believers.

Cameron feels that the muted response to the issue by the western church firstly involves a lack of education about the scientific and ethical implications of cloning as well as an attitude of pietism - seeking to address only the important issues of immediate concern to the church. According to GK Chesterton the only battles worth fighting are those that are already lost. Cameron believes this particular battle is far from over and the issues are indeed winnable. We have found ourselves with new friends in the debate as well as the opinions of both the public and the profession behind us. Whilst we believe that we are fallen in God's eyes, we are still created in his image and it is clear that this still rings true across traditional divides. We must seize and build on the opportunities that this presents in the months to come.

**Helen Barratt**

## Further Information

Human Cloning - [www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/subs/clone.htm](http://www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/subs/clone.htm)

The global media coverage of the cloning debate - *BMJ* 2001;323:406 (18 August)

## References

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