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Hindu spiritual leaders offer their faith's unique voice to the ethical debate on human cloning

A HINDU PERSPECTIVE

For the President, Mr. Bill Clinton

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to the ethical debate on human cloning

BY THE EDITOR



Questions about the constellation of moral issues surrounding the potential for cloning a human being were urgently posed to a number of the world's most respected spiritual leaders in several countries, representing diverse lineages of the Indian spiritual heritage. They responded swiftly and emphatically, knowing that the issue is a grave one that will ultimately impact nearly one billion Hindus in the world--fully one-sixth of today's human family.

In assembling these ethical statements, the editors of Hinduism Today realized that lay Hindus around the world should be better informed about these issues. In late March they published an article in their monthly international magazine which is enclosed for general reference. They have also prepared the following summary of the lengthy submissions, all of which are appended in full along with some biographical data on the spiritual men and women who responded.

Abstract:

Hindu leaders applaud President Clinton's call for a spiritual view on the human cloning predicament, noting that it shows his deep understanding of complex issues which cannot be resolved by science or politics alone. Hindu swamis appeal to the US President, and indeed to all heads of state who will face this issue, for laws to restrain cloning of humans and emphatically urge him to engage spiritually-minded people to guide and control the process. Good people are the best promise of a good outcome. It is our wish to inform the President that Hinduism neither condones nor condemns the march of science. If done with divine intent and consciousness, it may benefit; and if done in the service of selfishness, greed and power, it may bring severe negative karmic consequences. The simple rule is this: Cause no injury to others and let dharma--the law of good conduct and harmony with the universe and its many forces and creatures--be the guide for all such explorations.

Summary:

For many religionists, it is frightening to have man tinkering with God's universe. There's no manual, they fret. What if we break something permanently? The Creator made it with loving intent and divine intelligence, they offer, and it is arrogant, foolhardy and downright sinful for mankind to play God with something as profoundly consequential as the human genetic instruction.

It is possible to understand such a prudent warning and still disagree. While the argument makes sense with a Biblical God, Hinduism does not separate man from God so completely. Man is God; and God is man. Indian yogis and mystics speak of the cocreative process of evolution. Man is not merely following a distant Deity's decrees in fulfillment of the Divine Plan; he is engaged, alongside the Architect, in engineering that Plan; or you could say God is working His will through mankind, including scientists.

There are two fundamental principles that every Hindu applies to determination of right and wrong in questions of conduct or conscience. The first is ahimsa, noninjury. The second is nearness to God leading to moksha, spiritual liberation. Every action, word or even thought is judged against these two touchstones. Of course, the application of such broad principles is open to interpretation. How much

injury is permissible to clone a person or find a cure for cancer or congenital deafness? Many Hindus would answer none, not even to laboratory animals. Others postulate that the very search for a cure assumes that deafness and cancer are an unnecessary evil, a crack in the universal machine needing urgent repair. What of the purpose behind it all? What of the need some have to experience deafness or cancer? Cancer is the problem, says mind. How we confront cancer is the real issue, replies spirit. Are we looking for a perfect, death-defying body or are we looking for soulful qualities derived from experiencing life's joys and sufferings with wisdom and equanimity?

Most Hindu spiritual leaders we spoke to were less concerned for the moral issues and casuistry surrounding human cloning than for the practical need. Why do this? they asked again and again. Will it help us to draw nearer to God if we have such bodies? Will the soul's evolution toward the goal of spiritual liberation be advanced one millimeter? Will the process of reincarnation which leads each soul toward maturity and illumination be affected, altered or impaired? Will mankind's inner consciousness be enhanced? They think not.

But there are other voices. Some told us that a cloned body might be useful. Instructions exist in ancient Indian texts, explaining how to conceive a child of a passionless and poised nature, all based on the thoughts and yogic practices of the parents during coitus. If that is true, might not cloning, with its total elimination of human sexuality, provide a physical-emotional home for an advanced soul seeking an earthly passage of solace, needing to live without emotion or powerful desires and sentiments? And might not cloning bring us back to the Indian ideal of a 120-year lifespan?

It's hard for passionate people in old-fashioned bodies to think dispassionately about all this. Fears arise instantly, evoking the spectre of human farming, of armies of genetically engineered soldiers, of avaricious organ sellers and irreconcilable questions of inheritance, personhood and belonging. With all that complex surrogacy, whose children are the clones, what happens to the concept of family? In fact, human cloning is just the most recent moral dilemma between conscience and science. We have stood here before. Hindu scriptures, in fact, have dozens of references to cloning, of creating a full person or a full deity from a few cells of skin or other tissue. While widely considered mythological, these writings, several thousands of years old, are proving to be prescient.

For the Hindu, body and soul are very separate things, not created at the same moment. The soul inhabits many bodies in its passage toward enlightenment and spiritual freedom. The Hindu's concern for the well being of the soul in its journey from life to life far surpasses concern for the well being of the current embodiment. Just as the soul may make great spiritual progress in an imperfect body, it may also experience meager advancement in a perfect body. It is this inner progress towards our inherent perfection and the Divinity within all that defines the preciousness of life, not the quality of physical existence.

Hindus understand that all experience is governed by the complex laws of karma, which are as real, as invisible and as compelling as gravity. They hold that there are karmic consequences to every act, including cloning. How our karmas would be affected by such genetic interventions is an important meditation for the Hindu. Would your prarabdha karma--that portion which rules the present life span--be impacted if a duplicate of your body lived on, say 50 years, 100 or more beyond your death? Would you, the soul, be held up in the astral plane, awaiting a new birth indefinitely, waiting for your very-much-alive cloned physical entity to succumb and release you? If cloning so impacts spiritual progress, we would certainly want to approach it with circumspection.

Submitted with profound humility and hope that the laws of our great land will guard and guide this important new discovery of human knowledge and potential capacity, setting an example for all peoples and all nations.

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