

[Swami, Bill Clinton Has a Question](#)

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EDITORIAL

Swami, Bill Clinton Has a Question

The President is asking all faiths, including Hinduism, about the ethics of human cloning

the Editor

Questions from the White House are infrequent enough, even when indirect, that the Hinduism Today staff was equally honored and stunned by a March 14 phone call from the National Bioethics Advisory Committee. They have been commissioned by executive order to submit to Bill Clinton a summary of the ethics of human cloning for his early-April contemplations in deciding what US laws to impose on this remarkable, some say frightening, new scientific possibility. Part of the report to the President will be a summary of religious views of the issue, and we were deputed to assemble the Hindu conviction, summarized in our story on page 22.

The notion of having perfect genetic copies of ourselves, once the stuff of science fiction, is heading toward fact and causing a good deal of incendiary debate along the way. Critics say, "One of me is quite enough, and one of Adolf Hitler was too many. There's 5.4 billion of us. Why make more?" Initial discussions both with swamis and families indicate

unequivocally and overwhelmingly that Hindus find the idea of replicating human beings unnecessary, unethical and unthinkable. They recalled a surprising number of cloning references in the old Indian tales. Has it happened before? Could it happen in the future that we would meet or even teach the dharma to dozens of copies of ourselves? It gives new meaning to the Hindu ideal of seeing ourselves in others.

Many religionists find it frightening to watch man tinkering with God's universe. There's no user's 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 people 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 Law; he is engaged, alongside the Architect, in engineering that Law; 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? Some would answer none, not even to laboratory animals. Other Hindus postulate that the very search for a cure assumes that cancer is 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 cancer? Cancer is the problem, says mind. How we confront cancer is the real issue, says 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. Will it help us to draw nearer to God if we have such bodies? Will the soul's evolution toward Self Realization be advanced one millimeter? Will the inner consciousness be enhanced? They think not.

But there are other voices. Some told us that a cloned body might be useful. One noted that in ancient Greece, priests for the temples were specially created by hypnotizing or drugging two virgins and arranging for them to conceive a child. Because that sexual encounter was passionless (there even remained no memory of its having happened), it was said that their progeny would be unworldly and dispassionate, qualities wanted in a priest. Parallel instructions exist in ancient Indian texts, explaining how to conceive a child of this nature or that, 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, evoking the spectre of human farming, of armies of look-alike 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 idea of family? In fact, human cloning is just the most recent moral dilemma between conscience and science. We have stood here before.

A short list will put the problem in perspective. In the 15th century there was a terrible outcry when the first rifles and pistols were made in Spain. Surely, we thought, this would bring the end. When Karl Benz built the first automobile in Germany in 1885, clergy thought it of the devil and condemned it harshly. Many will remember the soul-searching that greeted the first successful atomic bomb test at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. When kidneys were first implanted into humans in the 1960s and a heart in the 1980s, the moral furor was universal and powerful. Ditto when man set foot on the moon July 20, 1969, and again when British researchers perfected in vitro fertilization of the human egg, leading to the birth of Louise Brown, the world's first "test-tube baby," conceived outside the human body and born on July 25, 1978; and again with surrogate mothers. You get the idea. Things that at first seem unthinkable gradually

become accepted. Who today thinks of a test-tube infant as a freak or considers plane travel to be against the natural order? Many did back then.

Hindus realize there are karmic consequences to every act, including cloning. Would your parabdha karma--that which rules the present life span--be impacted if a duplicate of your body lived on 50 years, 100 or more beyond your death? Would you, the soul, be held up in the astral plane, awaiting a new birth indefinitely, lingering until your very-much-alive physical body expired? Hindus consider that this life's karmas are not complete until the body succumbs, and having a part of the body remain alive could perhaps forestall freedom. If cloning so impacts spiritual progress, we would certainly approach it with circumspection.

Was it intuition that led Hindus to protect themselves from such a fate by requiring cremation? No one can dig up a Hindu's corpse and clone him or her from a piece of bone or skin. Not true outside of Indian culture, where we can still find the grave of a pharaoh or Isaac Newton or Elvis. Still, India preserved her saints, for they are the only Hindus traditionally interred. Did the rishis anticipate cloning millennia ago, and set up principles that would assure only the bodies of the most advanced souls would be cloned in some distant future? Hmmm!

Our summary to Bill Clinton will include a Hindu appeal 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.

We will share with him full transcripts of the sagacious counsel on cloning we received this month from spiritual leaders in several countries. We will 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 karmic consequences. The simple rule is this: Let dharma be the guide for all such explorations.