

Sunday, September 02, 2001
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

Woman pursues human cloning

Las Vegas part of movement inspired by Christ's resurrection

By JOELLE BABULA
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Jesus was cloned.

At least according to a Las Vegas woman who claims to be on the verge of the first cloning of a human.

Brigitte Boisselier is part of a movement that believes human beings -- and the resurrection of Christ -- are the result of an alien cloning experiment.

But more than just being a tenet of faith, the Raelian movement -- of which Boisselier is a bishop -- is trying to do with humankind what it believes its creators did in the first place.

And if her views are seen as being on the fringe of a science already outside the mainstream, Boisselier has been able to get the ear of Congress -- and people willing to shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars for the technology.

Cloning is more than sound science, it's a human right, Boisselier argues.

"It is a fundamental right to reproduce any way you want," she said during testimony in Washington, D.C., last month. "If you want to mix genes with others, then that's your choice. But if you want to reproduce only with your genes, then it is your right."

Such statements, along with her efforts to clone a 10-month-old boy who died from heart defects, have landed the 44-year-old on CNN and in national publications. Federal authorities have taken notice too, and they have launched an investigation into her cloning activities. U.S. News & World Report magazine has reported that a grand jury has been convened to look into her financial dealings.

Boisselier oversees Clonaid, a company funded by private investors that runs hidden labs scattered around the world. She refuses to disclose any lab locations, but said she has not set one up in Las Vegas.

Boisselier founded the company under the auspices of the Raelians with the

religion's leader, Claude Vorilhon, a French race car driver and journalist. Vorilhon changed his name to Rael after aliens revealed to him the origin of the human race during a UFO trip in 1973, the Clonaid Web site states.

There are more than 50,000 Raelians worldwide, according to the Web site.

"Once we can clone exact replicas of ourselves, the next step will be to transfer our memory and personality into our newly cloned brains, which will allow us to truly live forever," Vorilhon says on the Web site.

Raelian scientists are working toward adult cloning, but say they need to perfect the baby model first. Boisselier said that once she perfects the technology, her 22-year-old daughter will be enlisted as the surrogate mother who would give birth to an infant clone. She would carry a cloned egg to term.

The Clonaid Web site says it will charge "as low as \$200,000" for such services.

The idea wasn't farfetched to West Virginia lawyer Mark Hunt, who told the Charleston, S.C., Gazette that he had invested \$500,000 in Clonaid before he finally severed ties with the organization. The paper reported Hunt and his wife enlisted Boisselier to clone their 10-month-old son, who died two years ago.

Hunt, a former legislator, did not return repeated calls to his office.

Boisselier refused to answer questions regarding Hunt, but said he was not the only interested parent. She also declined to answer questions on her scientific credentials. The Web site describes her as having a Ph.D. in physical and biomolecular chemistry, but it does not say where she received her education.

Thousands of people around the world have called Clonaid in the hopes of someday replicating themselves or lost loves ones, she said.

There are eight scientists working in Clonaid labs in the United States and elsewhere, Boisselier said. She also said the most active labs were outside the United States.

Food and Drug Administration officials recently visited one of Boisselier's U.S. labs and ordered all cloning experiments to stop, spokeswoman Lenore Gelb said. The agency is investigating possible violations of FDA regulations regarding experimental procedures.

"We have inspected her lab and she signed a statement that she would not attempt human cloning in the U.S." until the matter is resolved by lawmakers, Gelb said, refusing to comment further. The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a bill that would ban all forms of human cloning. The bill still has to be approved by the Senate before it becomes law.

Boisselier and others in support of human cloning say the procedure is the only way to help some infertile couples and appease parents grieving the death of a child. Other potential customers would include gay couples and people who want to preserve their bodies, personality and memories.

Boisselier refused to say when her company might produce its first clone, saying only that Clonaid "cannot offer services until we have cloned the first baby. And we are working very hard to get that baby born. It will be very soon."

Current scientific theory says that to clone a human, genes from a cell must be injected into an egg that has been cleaned of all genetic material. The egg is then coaxed into an embryo and implanted in a womb. The fetus then becomes a replica of the cell donor.

Many scientists believe technology is advanced enough to begin experiments in human cloning, but are concerned that the outcomes would be unpredictable and dangerous. Those hesitant to experiment with human cloning say the process can cause birth defects, miscarriages and a host of other problems.

Animal clones die 98 percent of the time in the best of circumstances and are often disabled or disfigured if they do survive, according to Hessel Bouma III, a geneticist at Calvin College in Michigan. Bouma has testified before Congress regarding the ethics of human cloning.

"There is every reason to believe cloning is dangerous," Bouma said. "We have over 40,000 genes. If one of those fails to turn on, or turn on at the right time, there could be very serious consequences."

Cloned animals frequently suffer from defects, according to a recent article in New Scientist magazine. Those abnormalities include enlarged tongues, squashed faces, bad kidneys, intestinal problems, immune deficiencies, diabetes and "shortened tendons that twist the young animal's feet into useless curves."

Cloning researcher Cindy Tian said she could start cloning human babies tomorrow, but that the failure rate would be even higher than it is in animals.

"Humans are much more complicated," said the University of Connecticut scientist. "When we perfect cloning in the animal world and know exactly what is going to happen, then it is possible in humans. But I still don't want to do it."

This story is located at:

http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2001/Sep-02-Sun-2001/news/16884078.html