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Cloning breakthrough renews ethical debate

By Bob Allen

BOSTON (ABP) -- Reports that a Massachusetts firm had cloned the first human embryo has renewed an ethical debate about the limits of science and beginning of life.

Researchers at Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass., said they hoped the experiment would lead to developing specialized cells to combat serious illnesses. They said they had no interest in implanting a cloned embryo in order to give birth to a baby and indicated it is unclear if their embryo would have been capable of such a thing.

Still, reports Nov. 25 that the biotechnology firm had successfully cloned a six-cell human embryo drew immediate protests from pro-life groups that soon rippled across Capitol Hill.

The National Right to Life Committee called it a step toward "human embryo farms opening for business."

President Bush called the breakthrough "morally wrong."

"We should not, as a society, grow life to destroy it," said Bush, who earlier said the government could fund research using stem cells previously harvested from embryos but not for development of new stem-cell lines.

The report renewed a debate in Congress, where the U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill banning all human cloning, but a companion Senate bill is pending.

The Family Research Council urged an immediate vote on the Senate bill that would ban cloning for both experimentation and implantation. "Cloning a human being with the express intent of scavenging its precious parts is an assault on everything this nation stands for," said Ken Connor, president of the pro-life and pro-family group.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said research that destroys human embryos "is unconscionable and must no longer be permitted." Land urged senators to act before they adjourn for the year.

"As Americans we must now decide whether we are going to be a country that allows the destruction of our tiniest humans for the supposed benefit of older and bigger humans," Land said in a statement. "Unless

the answer is a resounding 'no,' ... barbarous consequences ... will follow this downward spiral into a new biotech dark age."

Critics on the other side of the cloning debate, meanwhile, called the experiment a failure because it failed to produce stem cells, which scientists believe hold promise for treatment of serious illnesses including spinal-cord injuries, heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Glenn McGee, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who once sat on the Advanced Cell Technology ethics board, described the announcement as "nothing but hype" that accomplished little beyond inflaming opponents of cloning.

He said the company's report lacks significant details. "They are doing science by press release," McGee told the Associated Press.

Researchers said they developed the clone using a donated female egg. Rules of the experiment called for the embryo to be destroyed after two weeks, but the company's report said it had stopped growing before then.

Neither of two cloning attempts, both described as preliminary, managed to produce stem cells, which are capable of developing into other body tissues.

Responding to criticism that destroying an embryo ends a human life, the company's top executive, Michael West, said on NBC's "Today" show that the work does not involve human life but "cellular life," which he termed a "fundamental distinction."

"I consider myself pro-life, by the way, and I do not see this as a pro-life issue at all," he said.

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Supreme Court upholds census counting practice

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld a Census Bureau counting method that Utah claimed discriminates against Mormon missionaries living overseas.

The Census Bureau counts Americans living abroad only if they are in military or government service. Utah claimed that discriminates against some 11,000 Mormon missionaries and cheated the state out of an additional congressional seat in the 2000 census. The new seat went instead to North Carolina. The Utah case asked the court either to include missionaries or exclude federal workers.

The suit said the counting method discriminates against people over the kind of work they do and infringed on religious freedom because it might discourage adherents from volunteering for missionary service.

The high court refused Nov. 26 to hear an appeal on a lower-court ruling granting the Census Bureau discretion in the counting of overseas Americans. The one-sentence ruling in the case "Utah vs. Evans" offered no explanation of the court's refusal.

In another church-state dispute, New York's highest court ruled that clergy members cannot be held financially liable for disclosing confidential information about parishioners.

The state's court of appeals ruled 7-0 that state law recognizes a right of confidentiality for statements made to clergy in counseling but doesn't allow wronged people to sue if confidentiality is breached.

The case involved a woman who in 1995 -- as her marriage was falling apart -- told two rabbis in confidence that she had stopped observing some Orthodox Jewish requirements.

She filed for divorce in 1996 and sought custody of the couple's four children. Her husband filed statements from the two rabbis, apparently in an effort to demonstrate the mother would not raise the children as Orthodox Jews.

Lawyers for the rabbis said they felt bound by Jewish law to disclose the information and that holding them liable would violate their First Amendment right to freely exercise their religion.

The court of appeals said state courts should not intrude in matters of religious law. "The prospect of conducting a trial to determine whether a cleric's disclosure is in accord with religious tenets has troubling constitutional implications," Judge Victoria Graffeo wrote in the court's opinion, according to Associated Press.

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-- By ABP staff

Accounting giant again under fire

By Bob Allen

NEW YORK (ABP) -- After three high-profile blown audits in the past year, some are asking if Arthur Andersen, once the conscience of the accounting industry, has become its black sheep.

A New York Times article raised the question Nov. 24, after Enron, a Houston-based energy and commodities company, revealed it had overstated profits by \$600 million because of "an accounting error" overlooked in Andersen-certified audits.

That followed two civil fraud complaints filed against Andersen by the Securities and Exchange Commission. One involved audits of appliance-maker Sunbeam. In May, Andersen agreed in a settlement to pay \$110 million to more than 10,000 Sunbeam stockholders but denied any wrongdoing. The other involved Waste Management, North America's largest trash hauler, which recently agreed to a \$457 million settlement of a class-action lawsuit over misleading investors about the company's financial health.

The news is of more than passing interest to 13,000 investors who lost money in the now-defunct Baptist Foundation of Arizona. The state of Arizona has sued Andersen for \$600 million on behalf of Foundation investors. The suit claims that Andersen ignored red flags and issued clean audits, making it possible for Foundation officers to defraud investors.

"It seems that their [Andersen's] track record is to say it was not their fault for about two years, stall as long as possible, then -- while admitting no guilt -- settle with investors for about what they should have two years earlier," said Dianna Francis, a former investor.

Francis invested \$35,000 from her son's Navy death benefit with the Foundation after hearing a representative speak at her church. Since the Foundation declared bankruptcy two years ago while owing investors about \$590 million, she has become an activist dedicated to exposing what she and others term the BFA "swindle."

Francis said she believed her money would be used primarily to start new churches and promote other types of Baptist work. Only after her funds were frozen did she learn of speculative land deals and allegations of a Ponzi scheme, where funds from new investors were used to pay off old ones.

Eight former Foundation officials were indicted in May on criminal charges. Three of them pleaded guilty to lesser crimes in exchange for turning state's evidence against the others.

Foundation assets were turned over to a liquidating trust that is making quarterly payments to investors as properties are sold. A fourth-quarter payment is promised in December, according to a posting on the group's Web site.

Arthur Andersen is named in charges of racketeering in the Foundation collapse. Should that charge stick, investors would under Arizona law be entitled to recover three times the amount of their original investment.

Francis said investors deserve it "because of all they have put us through."

Andersen "did profit by what they did to us, and our money sits in their accounts growing fat with interest," she said. "We want our money."

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Merritt asks Baptists to pray for conversion of Muslims

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The president of the Southern Baptist Convention is calling on church members to fast and pray for the conversion of Muslims on the last day of Islam's holy month, Ramadan.

James Merritt, president of the 16-million-member denomination and pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., issued a statement Nov. 26 asking Southern Baptists to fast and pray on Dec. 16 that "God will miraculously and supernaturally reveal himself through Jesus Christ to Muslims."

Ramadan commemorates when Muslims believe the prophet Muhammad received the Koran from God. During the month-long observance, adherents fast from dawn to dusk and offer special prayers.

Southern Baptists have in the past been criticized for coordinating similar prayers for evangelism of Jews and Hindus on days those faiths consider holy. Critics say it is disrespectful of other religions. Baptist leaders say the Bible teaches that Christ is the only way to salvation and commands them to preach the gospel to everyone.

A Muslim leader quoted by the Associated Press, however, seemed unfazed by Merritt's call.

"It's a free country," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on Islamic-American Relations. "If he wants Christians to fast and pray, we're hardly in a position to tell people not to."

Merritt said he chose the final day of Ramadan for the prayer emphasis, because it is when Muslims believe God speaks to them.

"We need to fast because we do believe that Christ is the only way to heaven," Merritt said.

"There is this idea that we all worship the same God at these interfaith meetings, and we do not," Merritt said.

Calling Christianity "the only true religion," Merritt added: "Every other religion gives a false hope of having a relationship with God. That's not what I say. That's what Jesus says."

Merritt echoed remarks made earlier by a Southern Baptist seminary president that Christians, Jews and Muslims don't worship the same God.

"It is often said, in fact it is now routinely claimed, that Muslims worship the same God as the Jews and the Christians," President Albert Mohler said in an October chapel address at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

But, Mohler countered, "Muslims do not worship the same God as the Christians and the Jews." He quoted Jesus' words from the Gospel of John, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

Further, Mohler said, "Christians and Jews do not worship the same God."

"That is a very difficult statement," he continued. "We believe there is one God who has revealed himself in the Old Testament and the New Testament. We must be very clear that to reject Jesus Christ is to reject the Father."

Mohler acknowledged that his statement is politically incorrect and "breaks all the rules of American etiquette."

But "if the Christian church will not be clear about the Christian gospel, who will?" he asked.

Mohler said a culture that celebrates diversity and rejects moral absolutes views monotheism as the "enemy," but for Christians it is "non-negotiable."

"So long as we say we have a savior and a God among other gods, ... there is no problem," Mohler said. "The moment we say there is one savior ... we enter into a world of dramatic political correctness in which we are ruled out of bounds and out of order."

Mohler said it isn't arrogant to make such a claim, however, because it's taught in the Bible.

"It is the one who claims to be the only living God who said to his people, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me,'" Mohler said. "That very assertion is politically incorrect in our modern, secular, postmodern, post-Christian world. That is simply ruled out of order; bad etiquette."

Mohler said the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, presumably motivated by religion, have drawn attention to Islamic teaching. Secular media debate whether Islam is inherently dangerous or militaristic.

Mohler said he would let others carry on that debate.

"The bigger problem with Islam is not that there are those who will kill the body in its name, but that it lies about God [and] presents a false gospel, an un-gospel," he said.

Mohler's comments about Judaism are reminiscent of remarks made two decades ago by Bailey Smith, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Smith declared in 1980 that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew," unleashing a firestorm of protest. He later met with Jewish leaders and expressed regret for hurt to the Jewish community. "Knowing how it would be misinterpreted," Smith said, he would not make the statement if he had it to do over again.

Lawrence Smith, Southern Seminary's vice president for communications, said some of Mohler's comments were taken out of context in news reports. In a letter to the editor of the Baptist Standard, Smith said the overarching theme of Mohler's 45-minute message was that events of recent weeks underscore the urgency for Christians to present the gospel to non-believers.

Smith said Mohler's views wouldn't come as a surprise to most Christians, however. "Jews do not worship the same god as Christians for the same reason that Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or those of any faith do not worship the same god as Christians -- they have rejected the deity of Christ."

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: Mohler's message, "Theology Matters," can be heard on Southern Seminary's Web site, www.sbts.edu

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