

"Dolly and the cloth-heads" *

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* title was chosen by the editor

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The admirable Dolly the sheep must have felt her cloned ears burning this week. She has seldom been off the air, seldom far from the Comment columns, the Leader pages or the Letters to the Editor.

What has intrigued me is the process by which invited contributors to the broadcast debates on such delicate matters are chosen. Some of them are experts in the field, as you would expect and as is right and proper. Others are distinguished scholars of moral or legal philosophy, which is equally appropriate.

Both these categories of person have been invited in their own right, because of their expert knowledge or their proven ability to think intelligently and express themselves clearly. The arguments they have with each other are usually illuminating and rewarding.

But there is another category of obligatory guest. There is the inevitable "representative" of the so-and-so "community"; and, of course, we mustn't forget the "voice" from the such-and-such "tradition". Not to mince words, the religious lobby. Lobbies in the plural, I should say, because all the religions have their point of view, and they all have to be represented lest their respective "communities" feel slighted.

This has the incidental effect of multiplying the sheer number of people in the studio, with consequent consumption, if not waste, of time. It also, I believe, often has the effect of lowering the level of expertise and intelligence. This is only to be expected, given that these spokesmen are chosen not because of their own qualifications in the field, or as thinkers, but simply because they represent a particular section of the community.

Out of good manners I shall not mention names, but this week I have experienced public discussions of cloning with several prominent religious leaders, and it has not been edifying. One of the most eminent of these spokesmen, recently elevated to the House of Lords, got off to a flying start by refusing to shake hands with the women in the studio, apparently for fear that they might be menstruating or otherwise "unclean".

They took the insult graciously, and with the "respect" always bestowed on religious prejudice (but no other kind of prejudice). The spokesman then, when asked what harm cloning might do, answered that atomic bombs were harmful. No disagreement there, but the discussion was in fact supposed to be about cloning.

Since it was his choice to shift the discussion to atomic bombs, perhaps he knew more about physics than about biology? But, no, having delivered himself of the daring falsehood that Einstein split the atom, he switched with confidence to geological history. He made the telling point that, since God laboured six days and then rested on the seventh, scientists, too, ought to know when to call a halt.

Now, either he really believed that the world was made in six days, in which case his ignorance alone disqualifies him from being taken seriously. Or, as the presenter charitably suggested, he intended the point purely as an allegory - in which case it was a lousy allegory.

Sometimes in life it is a good idea to stop; sometimes it is a good idea to go on. The trick is to decide when to stop. The allegory of God resting on the seventh day cannot, in itself, tell us whether we have reached the right point to stop in some particular case. As allegory, the six-day creation story is empty. As history, it is false. So why bring it up?

The representative of a rival religion on the same panel was frankly confused. He feared that a human clone would lack individuality. It would not be a whole, separate human being but a mere soulless automaton.

When one of the scientists mildly suggested that he might be hurting the feelings of identical twins, he said that identical twins were a quite different case. Why? Because they occur naturally, rather than under artificial conditions. Once again, no disagreement about that. But weren't we talking about "individuality", and whether clones are "whole human beings" or soulless automata?

This religious spokesman seemed simply unable to grasp that there were two separate arguments going on: first, whether clones are autonomous individuals (in which case the analogy with identical twins is inescapable and his fear groundless); and second, whether there is something objectionable about artificial interference in the natural processes of reproduction (in which case other arguments should be deployed - but weren't). I don't want to sound uncharitable, but I respectfully submit to the producers who put together these panels that merely being a spokesman for a particular "tradition" or "community" may not be enough. Isn't a certain minimal qualification in the IQ department desirable, too?

On a different panel, this time on radio, yet another religious leader was similarly perplexed by identical twins. He too had theological grounds for fearing that a clone would not be a separate individual and would therefore lack "dignity".

He was swiftly informed of the undisputed scientific fact that identical twins are clones of each other with the same genes, exactly like Dolly the sheep except that Dolly's clone is older. Did he really mean to say that identical twins (and we all know some) lack the dignity of separate individuality? His reason for denying the relevance of the twin analogy was even odder than the previous one. Indeed it was transparently self-contradictory.

He had great faith, he informed us, in the power of nurture over nature. Nurture is why identical twins are really different individuals. When you get to know a pair of twins, he pointed out triumphantly, they even look a bit different.

Er, quite so. And if a pair of clones were separated by 50 years, wouldn't their respective natures be even more different? Haven't you just shot yourself in your theological foot? He just didn't get it - but, after all, he hadn't been chosen for his ability to follow an argument.

Religious lobbies, spokesmen of "traditions" and "communities", enjoy privileged access not only to the media but to influential committees of the great and the good, to the House of Lords (as I mentioned above), and to the boards of school governors.

Their views are regularly sought, and heard with exaggerated "respect", by parliamentary committees. Religious spokesmen and spokeswomen enjoy an inside track to influence and power which others have to earn through their own ability or expertise.

What is the justification for this? Maybe there is a good reason, and I'm ready to be persuaded by it. But, on the face of it, isn't there more justification for choosing expert witnesses for their knowledge and accomplishments as individuals, than because they represent some group or class of person? Come to think of it, in the light of all those worries about lack of individuality among clones, isn't there a touch of irony here? Maybe even a useful allegory? Ah, now, you're talking!