

# The Spiritual Scientist

An ezine for those who think!

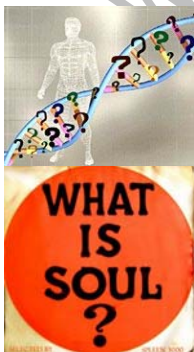
## Don't Play GOD

**Question:** What are the moral implications of the recent scientific attempts to create synthetic life?

**Answer:** In the recent experiments, artificial life has certainly not been created, but real life may well have been endangered due to such attempts to "play God." While researchers promise beneficial, often sensational, future results, the past track record of such promises shows counterproductive, often devastating, consequences. In the field of genetic engineering itself, genetically-modified (GM) food was advertised as the solution to world hunger, but it ended up causing hunger-deaths of hundreds of farmers in Maharashtra, India. These farmers were captivated by promises of pest-resistant seeds and high yields, but when the pests developed resistance to the seeds, the yields failed utterly. And as the GM seeds are designed to not give seeds for the next sowing, the farmers had no chance of a yield in the next season either. Afflicted by poverty, hunger and hopelessness, multitudes of them committed suicide. While some may see these as extrinsic and exceptional consequences of GM foods, the health hazards posed by such foods are intrinsic and universal to them. That's why the European Union has banned the use of GM food.



Genome manipulation of the kind done by Dr Venter can lead to the development of medicine-resistant variants of disease-producing microbes, which could trigger a pandemic. The genome Dr. Venter synthesized was copied from a natural bacterium that infects goats. Before copying the DNA, he claims to have excised fourteen genes likely to be pathogenic, so that the new bacterium, even if it escaped, would be unlikely to cause goats harm. But such measures may not be incorporated in future similar researches - either unintentionally or intentionally. Will we then see headlines of artificial deaths - deaths caused by attempts at artificial life - in the papers? A good cautionary step is that the US President acknowledged the development raised "genuine concern" and asked the White House bioethics commission study the issues raised by synthetic biology and report back to him within six months.



On a positive note, the "artificial life" news, by bringing to the forefront the age-old question of what life actually is, may prompt some soul-searching - at least figuratively and maybe even literally. The *Gita* points out (13.33-34) that the soul remains distinct from the organic system it animates, as does sunlight illuminating the universe or air pervading space. So when a part of the system is changed, the soul remains unchanged. This is like the computer-user remaining unchanged when a program within the computer is unchanged. If the current research could help us understand this basic matter-spirit, that would surely be a positive implication.

OR

