

Book Review:
“The Language of God” by Francis S. Collins
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Full title: “The Language of God; A scientist presents evidence for Belief”

Review by Robert Neary

Common are stories regarding people who early in life develop religious belief but who, upon maturing, studying, learning and thinking, become non-believers. However, occasionally one comes across the reverse scenario – a non-believer turning to religion in later life. Such is the case with Dr. Francis Collins, known most notably as the head of the Human Genome Project.

My father-in-law, Melvin, loaned me the book, *The Language of God; A scientist presents evidence for Belief*”, by Dr. Francis Collins. Mel is a retired professor of agriculture at Oregon State University. The sum of Mel’s work is founded on biological evolution and he is a staunch defender of the Theory of Evolution, the scientific method, and the importance of the separation of church and state. But Mel is also a “believer” and attends, when he can, the Baptist church in Corvallis as he has for decades. Mel describes himself as a “Jimmy Carter Christian”, believing that the true basis of Christianity is it’s foundation in doing good works and charity.

Mel knows that I am an Agnostic. He loaned this book to me, not so much to try and nudge me back to a religious point of view, but to make a point that some men of science, intelligent and learned men, believe that their intellect sometimes draws them back into acceptance of belief in God.

In the book, Collins describes himself as being raised by intelligent parents who home schooled him until he turned age ten, thereafter he attended public school. His parents were both educated, having met at graduate school in Yale in 1931. His upbringing was entirely bereft of God and religion and he had only the vaguest notions of what theology was about.

As a young adult, Collins studied quantum mechanics and mathematics at Yale. Collins states that at this time in his life, he was confident that no thinking scientist could seriously entertain the possibility of there being a God.

Collins eventually entered medical school, where for the first time, he was confronted with the emotional complexity of dealing with people in the grip of crippling and fatal diseases. He was moved by people’s strong reassurance of ultimate peace that they drew from their religious belief, particularly at times of great personal crisis. These moving personal experiences seeded doubts in the mind of Collins, thus he began to apply his scientific mind to the investigation of God.

A turning point for Collins seems to be when he read “Mere Christianity”, by C. S. Lewis. Collins describes the book as having particular influence on him; asserting that all of the arguments he held denouncing belief in God were adroitly countered by Lewis; almost, he felt, as though Lewis was addressing him personally.

The most significant concept that begins to tilt Collins toward belief is the issue of “right behavior”; essentially, how do we know right from wrong. He asks why are only humans imbued with this concept and why is it universally found among people throughout the globe? It is here Collins is introduced to the concept of Moral Law and its implications with altruism. He concludes, from reading Lewis, that altruism does not come from the result of the evolutionary benefit of man to cooperate and survive, but that altruism is an offshoot of Moral Law – a quality instilled in Man directly from the Creator from birth.

As “evidence” (his term, not mine) of our human-basis for the existence of Moral Law, he cites the behavior of children. Here he implies that child-like innocence and goodness is an indicator that God instills Moral Law in all people. This is the first major misconception I believe that Collins makes. Having worked in social services for a number of years, I have encountered children raised in abusive environments who clearly have no sense of altruism, let alone the remotest concept of right and wrong. These little brains were badly warped through the experience of abuse; they retain little more than their sense of self and are unable to form thoughts of empathy for others. They are also often unable to make emotional attachment to others as they reach adulthood. They suffer little impulse control or concept of consequences for their actions; often spending their adult lives within the criminal justice system. These children have no innate sense of right and wrong; no Moral Law. Collins’ conclusions are shockingly naive on this point.

Like Lewis, Collins then begins to take on the major criticisms of religious belief. Is religion merely “wishful thinking”, a fear of dying; of ceasing to continue to exist in the natural world? Sufficiently grounded in science, Collins believes he can easily make the distinction between the natural world, which includes science, and the spiritual world, which he claims is outside the natural world and therefore outside the purview (scrutiny) of science. It is here that he completely abandons the scientific approach and explores the basis for human conditions such as joy, feeling moved by a stirring piece of music, emotions such as love, loyalty, sorrow and grief. These are human attributes that he feels cannot be ascribed to a scientific cause. He makes the argument: Are the strong emotions of grief and love, a sensation of something greater than ourselves, merely a collection of neurotransmitters in our brains?

My experience concludes that answer is a resounding “Yes, these emotions are indeed brain electro-chemical reactions”. Consider people whose brains have been damaged by accident, illness or from birth. If these emotional responses existed outside of the physical brain, why then are developmentally challenged and brain damaged people often unable to feel or manage these emotions? To me it is akin to claiming that, although a car has an engine, some other outside force is what causes it to move. But damage the engine and the car ceases to run. We know that when the neurochemical systems in our brains don’t work properly, many of these human characteristics are absent.

Collins then challenges the argument that religious belief is simply a desire for a “father figure”; someone to nurture us and protect us from the realities of an impartial and random environment. Here he says that if people are expecting a benevolent, coddling and indulgent God, this would contradict the concept of Moral Law. But I argue that father figures are precisely like that; the maker of rules, enforcing punishment and reward. A father is very much like a God. In many religions, priests are even called “Father”. I think the all powerful and strict, but benevolent, father-figure is a very compelling concept among believers.

Finally Collins asserts that God exists because we have an innate desire for him to exist. A duck, he states, desires to swim so water exists. A baby desires food so food exists. So then the question that comes to my mind is; if I don’t desire God, does he therefore not exist?

A significant portion of the book is devoted to how he became involved with the human genome project and the basics of gene theory. This section is provided primarily for the non-scientist who has little knowledge of cell biology and genetics. These sections were probably quite useful to the notable individuals who praised the book and whose comments adorn the back jacket: Singer Naomi Judd and Crystal Cathedral pastor, Dr. Robert H. Schuler.

But ultimately what does Collins really believe and why? His belief, like many, is rooted in the questions of the origins of the universe (Anthropic principle) and, what I feel is the contradictory position, that God is both an impartial “creator” of the universe, but also a “personal” god, interested in each of us individually. Here I think Collins seems at odds with himself. He wishes to embrace all the tenants of science, including the physical origins and mechanics of the cosmos and biological evolution, and then he essentially tosses that away and essentially takes the position of a Creationist, proclaiming that this universe was created by God under a grand design. The underpinning of this grand design is the complex mechanism of the genetic code of which he has spent his life immersed.

Collins confesses that he is troubled by many of his fellow Christians who feel that the theory of evolution is in contradiction to a belief in a creator God. He expresses frustration at incidents when, speaking before an audience of other Christians, they have walked out of his lecture when he attempts to reconcile that scientific facts and spiritual belief is compatible.

In one anecdote, Collins recounts about how his daughter was raped while she was away at college. He was devastated by the act and troubled by the fact that God had not interceded to protect her. Ultimately he concluded that God had a “lesson” about life that he had to accept. What Collins didn’t recount, however, was how his daughter felt about the experience. For Collins the question is academic; but the daughter experienced the terror first hand. Did she learn something from God also as a result of her trauma?

Collins seems to often fall back on the term “evidence” rather loosely, in my opinion. He cites the Bible as the book of evidence for the divinity of Christ. The first books of the New Testament, he feels, are just-as-good-as first hand accounts of the tales of Christ. Of course, such evidence would be thrown out in a modern court of law as hearsay. The process of writing down of someone’s tale about healing the sick, materializing bread and fish, or rising from the dead does not make it factual, whether it was written 20 or 200 years after the supposed fact. Collins also says nothing to address the contradictions between the different books of the New Testament. He simply seems mesmerized by the antiquity of the gospels.

Collins gets around to attacking Atheists and Agnostics in the book, targeting Richard Dawkins particularly as being “vitriolic” and accusing him of having a personal agenda. Frankly, that is exactly what Collins’ book is about; his personal agenda where he checks his scientific brain at the door. He then falls prey to the usual circular arguments; claiming that Atheism is itself a form of “faith”. Unfortunately he doesn’t seem to recognize that Atheists have no basis, scientific or otherwise, for belief. Collins reserves his strongest contempt for Agnostics, saying they haven’t “taken the time” to investigate the evidence; that their ambivalence about the ability to address the ultimate question of God is a “cop out”.

The bottom line is that, for all his scientific acumen, Collins is a Creationist. He actually admits it: “Taken at face value, the term ‘creationist’ would seem to imply the general perspective of one who argues for the existence of a god who was directly involved in the creation of the universe. In the broad sense, many deists and nearly all theists, including me, would need to count themselves as creationists.” In the same breath he embraces Intelligent Design: “From my perspective as a geneticist, a biologist, and a believer in God, this [ID] movement deserves serious consideration.”

So why is this, apparently bright, scientist also a believer in a “Creator” God who is also his “personal” God? Though falling back on C.S. Lewis heavily to bolster his argument, it is clear that it feels comforting for Collins to believe. He is a man who has sought explanations for the mechanisms of human evolution through his studies of the genetic code. Unfortunately, the data piling up in the natural world does not easily reconcile with the emotional turmoil most all humans have wrestled with. Why are we here, why do bad things happen to us, where do we go when we die? Collins has been seduced by his lifetime devoted to scientific accomplishment – he believes in God because he wants very badly to believe. He wears the costume of a scientist when he is no longer doing science. He does this to try to add credence to fanciful beliefs, to create the illusion that he has pondered these truths as a scientist and that they hold up. They do not.