

Review of “The Language of God” by Francis Collins

Francis Collins is one of the world’s leading scientists, a geneticist and head of the Human Genome Project working at the cutting edge of study of DNA. He led the project to “read” for the first time the human genome which has 3 billion “letters” and a four-letter code. He also was involved in discovering genetic “misspellings” which cause cystic fibrosis, neurofibromatosis and Huntington’s disease. Initially he was an agnostic then an atheist. But, as we shall see, he eventually became a Christian believer.

He writes about his agnosticism: “There are all kinds of agnostics; some arrive at this position after intense analysis of the evidence, but many others simply find it to be a comfortable position that allows them to avoid considering arguments they find discomfiting on either side. I was definitely in the latter category ... I practised a thought and behaviour pattern referred to as ‘wilful blindness’ by noted scholar and writer C S Lewis.”¹ He concludes: “To be well-defended, agnosticism should be arrived at only after full consideration of all of the evidence for and against the existence of God. It is a rare agnostic who has made the effort to do so. (Some who have, and a rather distinguished list it is, have unexpectedly converted themselves to belief in God).”²

IS MORALITY A UNIVERSAL LAW?

Collins is very struck by the universality of morality and sees it as a law for human beings. “What we have here is very peculiar: the concept of right and wrong appears to be universal among all members of the human species (although its application may result in wildly different outcomes). It thus seems to be a phenomenon approaching that of law As best as I can tell, this law applies peculiarly to human beings. Some have argued that cultures have such widely differing norms for behaviour that any conclusion about shared Moral law is unfounded. Lewis, a student of many cultures, calls this ‘a lie, a good resounding lie. If a man will go into a library and spend a few days with the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics he will soon discover the massive unanimity of the practical reason in man. From the Babylonian Hymn to Samos, from the laws of Manu, the Book of the Dead, the Analects, the Stoics, the Platonists, from Australian Aborigines and Redskins, he will collect the same triumphantly monotonous denunciations of oppression, murder, treachery and falsehood; the same injunctions of kindness to the aged, the young, and the weak, of almsgiving and impartiality and honesty.”³

Collins adds: “.. the conclusion that the Moral Law exists is in serious conflict with the current postmodernist philosophy, which argues that there are no absolute rights and wrongs, and all ethical decisions are relative. This view, which seems widespread among modern philosophers but which mystifies most members of the general public, faces a series of logical Catch-22s. If there is no absolute truth, can postmodernism itself be true?”⁴

Collins goes on to say that altruism is a major challenge to the atheistic evolutionist. Some have claimed that such altruism is “a positive attribute to mate selection.” But this is contradicted by such behaviour as the practice of “infanticide by a newly dominant male monkey, in order to clear the way for his own future offspring.” This argument “cannot account for human motivation to practise small acts of conscience that no one else knows about.” Another argument is that so-called altruistic behaviour benefits the group. This would seem to require hostility to individuals outside the group. But much human altruism shows the opposite. Collins instances Oskar Schindler and Mother Teresa and adds: “Shockingly, the Moral Law will ask me to save a drowning man even if he is an enemy.”⁵

CAN SCIENCE DECIDE THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS?

Collins is quite clear that science cannot decide theological questions. “If God exists, then he must be outside the natural world, and therefore the tools of science are not the right ones to learn about him.”⁶ “Science is powerless to answer questions such as ‘Why did the universe come into being?’ ‘What is the meaning of human existence?’ ‘What happens after we die?’”⁷

He goes on to quote Stephen Jay Gould who wrote: “To say it for all my colleagues and for the umpteen millionth time: Science simply cannot by its legitimate methods adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it: we simply can’t comment on it as scientists. If some of our crowd have made untoward statements claiming that Darwinism disproves God, then I will find Mrs McInerney [Gould’s third grade teacher] and have their knuckles rapped for it ... Science can work only with naturalistic explanations; it can neither affirm nor deny other types of actors (like God) in other spheres (the moral realm, for example). Forget philosophy for a moment; the simple empirics of the past hundred years should suffice. Darwin himself was agnostic (having lost his religious beliefs upon the tragic death of his favourite daughter), but the great American botanist Asa Gray, who favoured natural selection and wrote a book entitled *Darwiniana*, was a devout Christian. Move forward 50 years: Charles D Walcott, discoverer of the Burgess Shale Fossils, was a convinced Darwinian and an equally firm Christian, who believed that God had ordained natural selection to construct the history of life according to his plans and purposes. Move on another 50 years to the two greatest evolutionists of our generation: G G Simpson was a humanistic agnostic, Theodosius Dobzhansky, a believing Russian Orthodox. Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs – and equally compatible with atheism.”⁸

Professor John Polkinghorne adds another dimension: “The poverty of an objectivistic account is made only too clear when we consider the mystery of music. From a scientific point of view, it is nothing but vibrations in the air, impinging on the eardrums and stimulating neural currents in the brain. How does it come about that this banal sequence of temporal activity has the power to speak to our hearts of an eternal beauty? The whole range of subjective experience, from perceiving a patch of pink, to being enthralled by a performance of the Mass in B Minor, and on to the mystic’s encounter with the ineffable reality of the One, all these truly human experiences are at the centre of our encounter with reality, and they are not to be dismissed as epiphenomenal froth on the surface of a universe whose true nature is impersonal and lifeless.”⁹

Collins rejects Creationism and Intelligent Design in favour of Theistic Evolution which he wants to rename Bios through Logos (God) or BioLogos. “BioLogos is not intended as a scientific theory.” “It proposes that God is the answer to questions science was never intended to address such as ‘Why did the universe come into being?’ ‘What is the meaning of human existence?’ ‘What happens after we die?’ ‘Its truth can be tested only by the spiritual logic of the heart, the mind and the soul.’”¹⁰

But what about evolution being “full of chance and random outcomes”? Collins gives a helpful answer: “The solution is actually readily at hand, once one ceases to apply human limitations to God. If God is outside of nature, then he is outside of space and time. In that context, God could in the moment of creation of the universe also know every detail of the future. That could include the formation of the stars, planets, and galaxies, all of the chemistry, physics, geology and biology that led to the formation of life on earth, and the evolution of humans, right to the moment of your reading this book. In that context, evolution could appear to us to be driven by chance, but from God’s perspective the outcome would be entirely specified. Thus, God could be completely and intimately involved in the creation of all species, while from our perspective, limited as it is by the tyranny of linear time, this would appear a random and undirected process.”¹¹

IS BELIEF IN GOD WISH-FULFILMENT?

Collins writes: “Atheists claim that belief in God is wish-fulfilment but the nature of God in the main religions is not in accord with wish fulfilment. If we are looking for benevolent coddling and indulgence we encounter Moral Law and our obvious inability to live up to it. We are in deep trouble and potentially eternally separated from the author of this law. Also children grow up to experience ambivalent feelings towards parents. Why should wish fulfilment lead to a desire for God rather than for there to be no God.”¹² He then quotes C S Lewis who adds: “If God is something humans wish for that does not rule out the reality of God Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.”¹³

WHAT ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING?

Collins acknowledges that the planet is engaged in an evolutionary process and so experiences “the unpredictability of the weather, the slippage of a tectonic plate, or the misspelling of a cancer gene in the

normal process of cell division.” He responds: “If at the beginning of time God chose to use these forces to create human beings, then the inevitability of these other painful consequences was also assured. Frequent miraculous interventions would be at least as chaotic in the physical realm as they would be in interfering with human acts of free will.”¹⁴

He stresses that suffering is an opportunity to learn important lessons. He writes: “In my case I can see, albeit dimly, that my daughter’s rape was a challenge for me to try to learn the real meaning of forgiveness in a terribly wrenching circumstance. In complete honesty, I am still working on that. Perhaps it was also an opportunity for me to recognize that I could not truly protect my daughters from all pain and suffering; I had to learn to entrust them to God’s loving care, knowing that this provided not an immunization from evil, but a reassurance that their suffering would not be in vain. Indeed my daughter would say that this experienced provided her with the opportunity and motivation to counsel and comfort others who have gone through the same kind of assault.”

Collins testimony here is moving, however I find his philosophical arguments concerning innocent suffering less than satisfactory. In the end we do not know why there is so much innocent suffering but we do believe in a God who, as the crucifixion shows, shares it with us and strengthens us.

HOW DID COLLINS COME TO CHRISTIAN BELIEF?

It was through his scientific work that Collins eventually became a Christian believer. “I found this elegant evidence of the relatedness of all living things an occasion of awe, and came to see this as the master plan of the same Almighty who caused the universe to come into being and set its physical parameters just precisely right enough to allow the creation of stars, planets, heavy elements, and life itself.”¹⁵

He points out that at the Big Bang an almost equal amount of matter and anti-matter was formed. But for every billion quarks there was an extra quark. The universe was created because of this inequality, but such inequality (asymmetry) is not natural.

He quotes Stephen Hawking: “Why did the universe start out with so nearly the critical rate of expansion that separates models that recollapse from those that go on expanding for ever, that even now, 10 thousand million years later, it is still expanding at nearly the critical rate? If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in 100 thousand million million, the universe would have recollapsed before it ever reached its present size.”¹⁶ Collins adds that on the other hand, if the rate of expansion had been greater by even one part in a million, stars and planets could not have been able to form.”

He writes: “The existence of a universe as we know it rests upon a knife edge of improbability”¹⁷ If strong nuclear force that holds together protons and neutrons had been even slightly weaker, then only hydrogen could have formed not heavier elements. If the strong nuclear force had been slightly stronger all the hydrogen would have converted to helium and nuclear fusion in stars would not have started.

Collins points out that there are 15 physical constants whose value current theory is unable to predict. They are givens: the speed of light, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces, the various parameters associated with electromagnetism and the force of gravity and concludes: “The chance that all of these constants would take on the values necessary to result in a stable universe capable of sustaining complex life forms is almost infinitesimal ... In sum, our universe is wildly improbable.”¹⁸

He quotes Stephen Hawking: “The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications.”¹⁹ Hawking also wrote: “It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us.”²⁰

IS EVOLUTION INCOMPATIBLE WITH BELIEF IN GOD?

As a theistic evolutionist, Collins answers this question negatively. He admits: “Currently we do not know how self-replicating organisms arose in the first place (within 150 million years) “That is not to say that

reasonable hypotheses have not been put forward, but their statistical probability of accounting for the development of life still seems remote.”²¹

To the Creationist’s criticism of the lack of sufficient clear fossil evidence for evolution he responds: “The vast majority of organisms that have ever lived on Earth have left absolutely no trace of their existence, since fossils arise only in highly unusual circumstances. (For example, a creature has to be caught in a certain type of mud or rock, without being picked apart by predators. Most bones rot and crumble. Most creatures decay.)”²²

Collins then quotes Darwin on religion. Darwin wrote: “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of anyoneA celebrated author and divine has written to me that he ‘has gradually learned to see that it is just as noble a conception of deity to believe that he created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that he required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of his laws.’” Darwin concluded the Origin of Species by saying: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.”²³

Darwin’s religious views varied. At one time he wrote: “Agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.” But then he wrote of “the extreme difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity for looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.”²⁴ (Ibid p. 459)

Finally, Collins quoted Einstein: “Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.”²⁵

¹ p. 15f

² p. 168.

³ C S Lewis ‘The Poison of Subjectivism’ in C S Lewis Christian Reflections ed Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1967), p. 77, quoted in Collins op. cit., p. 23

⁴ Collins op. cit., p. 24.

⁵ Collins op. cit., p. 28.

⁶ Collins op. cit., p. 30.

⁷ Collins op. cit., p. 6.

⁸ S J Gould , Impeaching a Self-Appointed Judge, (review of Philip Johnson’s Darwin on Trial), Scientific American 267 (1992), 118-120, quoted in Collins, op. cit. Pp. 165-166.

⁹ Belief in God in an Age of Science, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 18-19), quoted by Collins pp. 228-229.

¹⁰ Collins, op. cit., p. 204.

¹¹ Collins, op. cit., p. 205.

¹² Collins, op. cit. p. 37.

¹³ Mere Christianity p. 115, quoted by Collins, p. 38.

¹⁴ Collins, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁵ p. 99

¹⁶ A Brief History of Time, New York, Bantam Press 1998, 138, quoted by Collins pp. 72-73.

¹⁷ Collins, op. cit. p. 73.

¹⁸ Collins, op. cit. p. 74.

¹⁹ Quoted in Science Meets Religion by Ian Barbour, New York Harper Collins 2000, quoted by Collins p. 75.

²⁰ A Brief History of Time, p. 144, quoted by Collins p. 75.

²¹ Collins, op. cit., p. 90.

²² Collins, op. cit., p. 94.

²³ The Origin of Species, New York Penguin, 1958, 452, quoted in Collins. p. 98

²⁴ The Origin of Species, New York Penguin, 1958, 459, quoted in Collins. p. 98

²⁵ A Einstein, Science, Philosophy and Religion: A Symposium (1941) quoted in Collins p. 228.