

The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief
by Francis Collins

The title of this good book is perhaps an ‘over-reach’ in claiming to present *evidence* for belief. It is probably fairer to claim, as Collins claims throughout his book, that to argue science demands atheism ‘goes beyond the evidence’. Similarly, as to whether belief in Darwin and evolution means we cannot also hold that God has some ‘superintendence’ of nature is beyond the call of science. Collins argues that the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with religious beliefs --- ‘and equally compatible with atheism’.

But perhaps it is not an over-reach to claim, as one reviewer of Collins claims, that *The Language of God* provides the best argument for the integration of faith and logic since C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. The comparison to Lewis is particularly apt as Collins readily acknowledges his debt to Lewis from the outset of his book.

The first chapter of the book is essentially a testimony to Collins’ spiritual journey from atheism to agnosticism to theism to Christian faith. Home-schooled and intellectually gifted, Collins matriculated as a freshman into the University of Virginia. As a post-graduate, he was led to study medicine at the University of North Carolina. Medical school allowed him to combine his new love of medicine with his old love of mathematics.

And then a course in medical genetics added a vital human element to Collins’ formation. His tutor brought patients to class with sickle cell anemia, galactosemia (an often- fatal inability to tolerate milk products), and Down syndrome, all caused by glitches in the genome, some as subtle as a single letter gone astray. Collins was astounded by the elegance of the human DNA code and the many consequences of ‘those rare careless moments of its copying mechanism’.

“This path,” he writes, led me by the third year of medical school into intense experiences involving the care of patients. . .

‘What struck me profoundly about my bedside conversations with these good North Carolina people was the spiritual aspect of what many of them were going through. I witnessed numerous cases of individuals whose faith provided them with a strong reassurance of ultimate peace, be it in this world or the next, despite terrible suffering that in most instances they had done nothing to bring on themselves. If faith was a psychological crutch, I concluded, it must be a very powerful one’.

But the encounter with one suffering patient took him even further:

My most awkward moment came when an older woman, suffering daily from severe untreatable angina, asked me what I believed. It was a fair question; we had discussed many other important issues of life and death, and she has shared her own strong Christian beliefs with me. I felt my face flush as I stammered out the words “I’m not really sure”. Her obvious surprise brought into sharp relief a predicament that I had been running away from for nearly all of my 26 years: I had never really seriously considered the evidence for and against belief.

The encounter with that woman haunted him greatly in the weeks that followed:

Did I not consider myself a scientist? Does a scientist draw conclusions without considering the data? Could there be a more important question in all of human existence than “Is there a God?” And yet there I found myself, with a combination of willful blindness and something that could only be properly described as arrogance, having avoided any serious consideration that God might be a real possibility. Suddenly all my argument seemed very thin, and I had the sensation that the ice under my feet was cracking.

Collins, confused about belief, sought the advice of a Methodist minister, a neighbor from down the street. He asked him if whether faith made any logical sense. The minister reached to his bookshelf and took down a small book and recommended Collins to read it:

The book was ‘Mere Christianity’ by CS Lewis. . . When I learned subsequently that Lewis had himself been an atheist, who had set out to disprove faith on the basis of logical argument, I recognized how he could be so insightful about my path. It had been his path as well.

The argument for theism in *Mere Christianity* that struck the deepest chord in the mind and heart of Francis Collins was the so-called Moral Argument that points to God. Lewis argued:

We have two bits of evidence about the Somebody. One is the universe He has made. If we used that as our only clue, then I think we should have to conclude that He was a great artist (for the universe is a very beautiful place), but also that He is quite merciless and no friend to man (for the universe is a very dangerous and terrifying place). The other bit of evidence is that Moral Law which He has put into our minds.

“And this is a better bit of evidence than the other because it is inside information. You find out more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built. Now, from this second bit of evidence, we conclude that the Being behind the universe is intensely interested in right conduct—in fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty, and truthfulness.

Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher, wrote:

Two things fill me with constantly increasing admiration and awe, the longer and more earnestly I reflect on them: the starry heavens without and the Moral Law within.

The Language of God is by and large a testimony to one scientist’s similar admiration for the way in which our understanding of the physical nature of the universe and evolution and the complexities of the human genome all point to God while at the same time equally in awe of the universality of the Moral Law in human societies manifesting itself repeatedly in acts of selfless altruism leads us to affirm a benevolent and personal God.

Collins is overall an excellent writer and so readable. He is particularly good in offering working definitions to help the reader understand the development of his arguments. One such definition is that of *doubt*. With a nod to Paul Tillich, he writes that doubt is not something antithetical to faith but rather an integral part of the development of faith. He then distinguishes between the

sources of our doubts. One broad category involves perceived conflicts of the claims of religious beliefs with scientific observations. The other broad category of doubt resides with the more philosophical realms of human experience. *The Language of God* is pretty much Collins' dialogue with each of these categories of doubt and his apology for the Christian faith in the light of them.

Some readers might think, 'been there, done that' in terms of working out one's basic answer to the question of the compatibility of science to religious faith. There are recognizable limits to the Christian's apologetics in this realm and there are recognizable limits for the scope of science in addressing questions fundamental to the meaning of life. I have 'been there, done that' but I have never made the journey with a scientist quite like Francis Collins with his obvious apologetic skills and clarity of expression. He is simply a pleasure to read. And he is fun. There are plenty of 'asides' that made me laugh. As a veteran college chaplain, having some thirty years sat through scores of lectures and conversations on the many strange and counterintuitive concepts and theories of contemporary physics that capture anew each generation of intelligent undergraduates, I smiled in coming across Collins' reference to the comment of the physicist Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937): "A theory that you can't explain to a bartender is no damn good". By that standard many theories in physics (or theology) are in trouble.

Finally, I would commend *The Language of God* as being a book of Christian apologetics with something in it of all stripes. If you consider yourself a liberal minded person who likes to say, "I joined the Episcopal Church because I didn't have to leave my mind at the door" you will be drawn to Francis Collins. If you are an evangelically minded Christian who wants to know how the centrality of the Cross and the Atonement figure in the Collins apology you will receive an added bonus in following his testimony from agnostic turned theist turned full-fledged Christian of a decidedly Evangelical stripe. If you are an agnostic or an atheist who has heard but is not convinced of the claims of Christian apologetics, you might be drawn to recognize in Collins a man of gifted intelligence and a genuine faith and find in him, as Christopher Hitchens so called him, a 'great American'.

The Language of Faith: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief, paperback, 2007 is available for ordering from any of our fine bookstores attached to parishes across the Diocese or directly from Amazon.

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