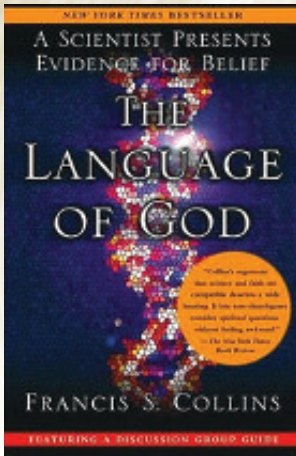




# THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

REVIEWED BY DR MEGAN BEST



**The Language of God**  
Francis S. Collins  
2007, Simon & Schuster

The interface of faith and science is often discussed by passionate Christians and scientists who have poor understandings of their opponents' subject. It was therefore with anticipation that I began reading this volume, written by a man with a foot in each camp, intent on instructing both sides about how they could get along with the other. Dr Francis Collins, a respected scientist, aims to dispel the notion that belief in God requires suspension of reason and assert that the principles of faith are in fact not just consistent but indeed complementary to the principles of science. In this book he explores a pathway towards an intellectually honest integration of natural and spiritual perspectives.

I have heard Dr Collins speak about his background, noting that although he is often asked how a Christian could become a geneticist, he states that the question should be the other way around. Collins is well known as the director of the Human Genome Project, an international research collaboration initiated in 1990 that led to the completed mapping of the DNA sequence of the entire human genome in April 2003. He is involved

with the ongoing task of determining the function of the estimated 20,000 genes identified. He is very familiar with the double helix and tends to break into poetry each time he comes to reflect on its beauty and elegance. He also studied physical chemistry before training in medicine and genetics: his scientific credentials are unquestionable.

Early in the book, Collins explains his journey to faith while at medical school. He was so challenged by the faith he saw in some of his patients that he was compelled to consider the possibility of a spiritual realm, and so proceeded to review the evidence, as is a scientist's wont. He was greatly influenced by the writings of CS Lewis, in particular Lewis's discussion of the moral law. So when he decided the time was right to embark on a contribution to the science and religion debate, it is not surprising that Collins adopted a similar style.

Francis Collins has a big picture of God. Throughout the book he encourages

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us to seek answers – the God whose creation astonishes him in its sophistication will not be threatened by our questions. He rightly addresses the need to resolve philosophical questions before material ones can be dealt with, as the result of questioning what is possible informs what we are able to observe in our experience. So, in Part One he deals with common philosophical objections to Christianity, where his allegiance to Lewis is obvious. Having established the feasibility of the supernatural, he then launches into an analysis of the origins

of the universe with obvious relish.

The astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are shown to be consistent in Collins's treatment of Big Bang Theory, and the Anthropic Principle provides him with an argument in favour of a creator. He then moves on to Quantum Mechanics and the Uncertainty Principle and Cosmology and the God Hypothesis. While he recognises that no scientific observation can reach the level of absolute proof of the existence of God, he gives food for thought for those willing to consider a theistic perspective. Certainly, it is obvious that he envisages a satisfying harmony between science and religion and has confidence that, if both are true, full synthesis must be possible.

Next in his sights is the issue of evolution. One of the things I appreciated in this book was Collins's recognition of the problem of semantics in the science/religion divide. Tired stereotypes are dismissed by clarifying the terms involved in these discussions, and even inventing new ones. The evolution debate is a prime example. Think of the different understandings of the meaning of the word 'theory'. Though no one knows how life started on earth, Collins guides us through some possibilities and argues strongly against a 'God of the gaps' approach. Attributing the unknown bits to God

means that new knowledge demands a theological revision. It does a disservice to religion and is not necessary. Naturalistic explanations, including molecular mechanisms and natural selection, are compatible with a creator God. Scientific discoveries do not need to remove God from the equation, they merely show us something of how he operates.

Darwin's theory of evolution is, according to Collins, the most contentious issue in the discourse he is addressing. Creationism (redefined), literal interpretations of Genesis, and the

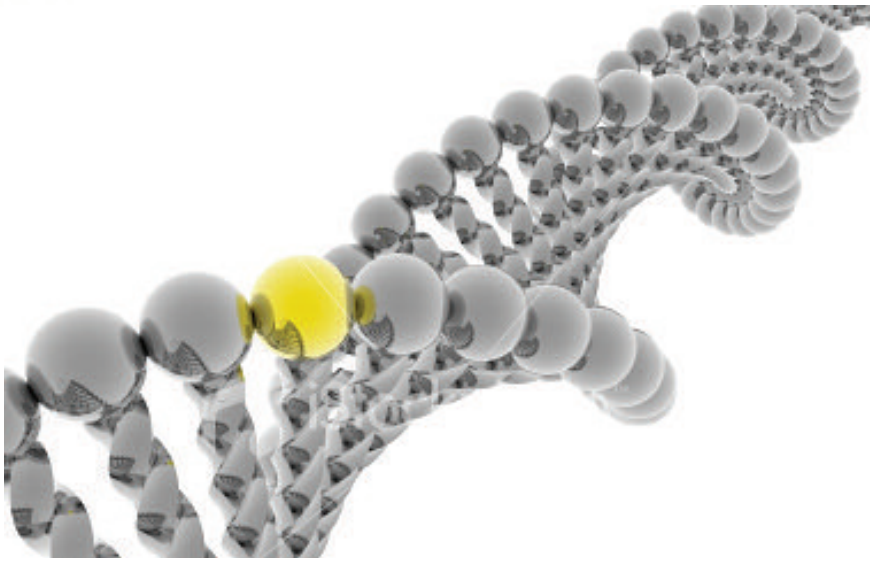
dangers of insisting that young people ignore modern research are addressed in a loving entreaty to the evangelical Christian church to resist assuming an automatic attitude of antagonism towards scientific truths. Battles for the gospel cannot be won on a flawed foundation and indeed they may damage faith in the process. Intelligent Design (also redefined) and, of course, the implications of recent developments in genomics that support evolution theory are also explained.

However, Collins reminds us that to be human involves more than just our DNA. In fact, science alone can not by its legitimate methods adjudicate the issue of God's superintendence of nature either way. Richard Dawkins is brought in to illustrate this point. Collins suggests that atheism, in light of the evidence, is

dilemmas in public debate, the appendix begins well with an enthusiastic discussion of the promise of the genomic revolution, a topic close to Collins's heart and one he covers well.

We then have a superficial discussion of ethical theory before embarking on stem cells and cloning. Well. In his enthusiasm to see the benefits of human embryonic stem cell research proceed, Collins suggests that, although an embryo is a potential human life, it is difficult to be sure when that life should

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less rational than faith in God. He ends the main text by calling for a truce. He challenges scientists to reconsider the spiritual worldview, and exhorts believers to not attack but seek out new scientific knowledge, remembering, in the words of Copernicus, 'To know the mighty works of God ... surely ... this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship to the Most High, to whom ignorance cannot be more grateful than knowledge.'

This was a satisfying conclusion to a well-argued thesis. So you can imagine my dismay when I proceeded to read an appendix that abandoned careful logic in favour of scientific expedience. Focusing on some of the bioethical

be protected. In short, he argues that by allowing IVF, we are endorsing conditional destruction of embryos and therefore can justify the use of excess frozen IVF embryos in destructive research. He also offers reasons why we should not object to destructive research on human embryos created by cloning. He does not commit himself to a view on the ethics of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (which involves the discarding of human embryos) and hesitates to endorse faith-based bioethics. I won't go into the flaws of his moral reasoning; suffice to say he does not seem to have thought through the implications of his comments. It is true that regenerative

medicine holds great promise and should be supported, but that does not mean the ends justify the means (see Romans 3:8). An embryonic human surely remains human and holds its moral value regardless of location, genetic makeup and intended use. Indeed, recognition of these premises has subsequently led to scientific breakthroughs that have obviated the need for human embryo destruction.

We finally see how he got into trouble at the end of this section when he

articulates his desire to find a consensus between those who wish to justify questionable moral acts in attempts to follow the mandate to heal and those who wish to follow the moral obligation to do no harm. The stem cell debate is a good example. I appreciate his desire to find the compromise position, as he has done in the body of the book. However, I think he has missed the point here. When one side determines right from wrong on the basis of the consequences of their actions, and the other side observes absolute values where some things should never be done regardless of consequences, there is no consensus position. They will always disagree because they are looking at different parts of the equation. We must be vigilant to make sure we do not compromise our own values in the search for consensus.

So, what is my judgement? With his reasoned approach, Collins has made a valuable contribution to the faith versus science debate. I found it an easy read and expect that his scientific credentials and accessible explanations for non-scientists will do much to ease Christian hostility to science, and scientific hostility to the church. I would recommend this book to both groups, though I would probably tear out the appendix before giving it to them. ©