



## C.S. Lewis Goes to the Laboratory

Thomas W. Merrill

Americans love to talk about reason and revelation, but we aren't very good at it. With our passion for vulgar controversy, we tend to see everything in terms of extremes: religion versus science, faith versus Darwin. And while those tensions are a sustained theme in our national inner life, these perennially unsettled questions have heated up again in recent years. Consider the battles over Intelligent Design in Dover, Pennsylvania, or the charges that the Bush administration systematically ignores scientific facts (as with stem cells) and the facts on the ground (as in Iraq) out of an imperious religious certainty.

For renowned atheists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, religion—all religion—is the source of great evil in the world, and the root of that evil is the unwillingness to limit our beliefs to the evidence. Religion, according to them, is not just belief in truths beyond the reach of human reason but belief in things contrary to human reason. For them, all religion is fanaticism, and the most far-reaching political question of our day is not the conflict between the

liberal democratic West (made up of believers and nonbelievers alike) and Islamic fundamentalism, but between reason and religion, within the West perhaps even more than outside it.

Believers might understandably feel that these shrill critiques are animated by personal vitriol instead of honest truth-seeking, a kind of anti-fanaticism fanaticism. In his new book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, Francis

Collins provides a counter-example to the Dennett-Dawkins view of what it means to be religious. A noted geneticist, best known for leading

the Human Genome Project, and an avowed Christian, Collins stands at the intersection of science and religion. The very title of his book illustrates his thesis. The language of God, in the first instance, refers to the mapping of the human genome, one of the major scientific accomplishments of recent years. But Collins also wants us to hear the echoes of revelation, to think that nature might still be seen as pointing, however indirectly, toward the Christian God.

Collins does not write primarily with a view to winning souls. His

*The Language of God: A Scientist  
Presents Evidence for Belief*  
By Francis S. Collins  
Free Press ~ 2006 ~ 294 pp.  
\$26 (cloth)

more modest intent is to win greater respect for his position as a scientist and a believer by making it more intelligible to nonbelievers. His aim is to make us think that a believing scientist is not an oxymoron. To that end his efforts are largely successful. He recounts how he came to Christianity, and he argues that modern science does not provide conclusive evidence against God's existence. He also has another audience in mind, perhaps more important in the long run: believers who worry that Darwin and evolution will undermine their faith. To those who are tempted to embrace so-called Creation Science or Intelligent Design, Collins gently suggests that believers too have an obligation to the knowable truth; whatever the dangers, the response to modern science cannot be simply shutting our eyes and ears. In addition to these already lofty aims, Collins also attempts to adjudicate some of our familiar bioethical controversies. In this task, unlike his more prominent goals, Collins is, alas, quite a bit less successful.

The scientific part of Collins's argument is actually secondary to his larger argument about the plausibility of religion. More important is his account of his extra-scientific grounds for belief and his autobiographical treatment of his conversion. He suggests that what was most important for him was the realization that the Moral Law

is true, not arbitrary. As an empirical matter, he claims that human beings are conscious of a standard of right and wrong that governs their behavior, beyond any merely utilitarian calculations. To those who point to the apparent relativism of moral judgments in different times and places, Collins replies that the very controversies over justice and duty show that we are dimly aware of some common thing, some moral fact of the matter. And he suggests that many of these controversies are more apparent than real. Following C.S. Lewis, Collins argues that the Moral Law finds its fullest expression and its necessary grounding in Christianity.

The positive core of Collins's belief is based on this notion of the Moral Law, together with what he calls the human hunger for the divine. Within this context, Collins's treatment of modern science plays a necessary but largely subordinate role. If I understand him correctly, modern science, at the very least, does not disprove the conclusions of faith, and in some respects tends to corroborate them. So, for example, Collins makes much of the Big Bang, which suggests that the universe had a definite beginning in time. When medieval philosophers debated whether God was the God of Aristotle or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the question turned on whether the universe was eternal or whether it was created in time. Now modern science thinks

that the universe was undoubtedly created in time; Collins, like his medieval predecessors, suggests that this is consistent with an omnipotent Creator God.

Collins also looks to the scientific evidence to chastise his fellow believers who have turned to Creationism and Intelligent Design. Both movements stem, in his view, from an understandable desire to counteract the general coarsening of American culture. Both movements trace that coarsening to the long-term influence of Darwinism and the unfettered pursuit of self-preservation, as well as the reduction of man to just another beast, no longer seen as created in the “image of God.” But Collins suggests that Creationism is really unsustainable in view of the fossil record; no serious person who cares about the truth could believe it.

As for Intelligent Design (ID), Collins indicates some sympathies mixed with many serious reservations. He does evince a real sense of awe at the improbabilities involved in the fact of human beings being what they are—complex, intelligent, filled with wonder. But the specific theses of ID he finds dubious. For example, ID builds much of its case on claims of “irreducible complexity.” The eye, it is said, is so complex and so finely tuned that it could not possibly be the product of blind evolution. The whole system necessarily exists in the Creator’s imagination before the assembly of the complex parts. The

problem with this claim is that it confuses “not yet understood” with “can never be understood.” It also appeals to causes—the workings of an intelligent designer—that are very difficult if not impossible to test. ID comes very close to appealing to a “God of the gaps” or a divine cause we bring in whenever we are stuck for an explanation. Collins also claims that certain prominent phenomena of nature, like the bacterial flagellum, are not really examples of irreducible complexity as ID proponents often claim. These phenomena are, instead, being explained by evolutionary theory before our very eyes.

As Collins presents them, both Creation Science and ID run the risk of discrediting the cause of faith by putting too much stress on indefensible claims. If the crusading atheists need to be reminded of the limits of their knowledge, so too do these believers need to face up to the truths we can know. But if science does not disprove the largest claims made by religion, Collins reasons, then faith need not enter into a battle it is doomed to lose. These religious claims are ultimately moral and spiritual, grounded in the knowable truths of conscience and the human longing for the divine.

**F**or all its elegance, however, Collins’s book leaves some important questions unaddressed or inadequately addressed. Collins mainly uses science to indicate the limits of

our knowledge, and thus the great leap we have to make to say that science disproves God. For this reason, the subtitle of his book might have been: “A Scientist Presents Evidence Against Disbelief.” Strictly speaking, though, Collins does not—as a scientist—present evidence for *positive* belief. Surely his careful reminders of the limits and mysteries that still exist in our scientific age are salutary. But does it go beyond that? “Is consistent with” is by no means the same thing as “entails,” and one can easily imagine a Socrates rather than a Dawkins pressing just this question. However absurd the crusading atheism of our pop-neo-Darwinists might be, one must ask whether the search for the knowable truth necessarily leads to belief in the Christian God.

Even more problematic is Collins’s attempt to apply the Moral Law to certain modern controversies in bioethics. This is, by far, the least impressive part of the book. Partly this is due to his smorgasbord approach, covering the quandaries of DNA testing for various diseases, stem cells, cloning, the genetic basis of homosexuality and IQ, and biomedical enhancement in a scant thirty-seven pages. Had he wanted to try to bridge the gap between religious voters and the scientific community, Collins should have tackled these divisive issues more fully, with the same rigor he no doubt brings to the laboratory.

Instead, he gives us an unsatisfying collection of largely conven-

tional, often superficial, and occasionally ridiculous arguments. Let one example suffice. Collins argues at length in support of somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), the technical procedure used to clone Dolly the sheep, which many scientists now seek to use to produce cloned human embryos that can be disaggregated for their stem cells. SCNT takes the nucleus of an adult cell and inserts it into an egg cell whose own nucleus has been extracted. Properly stimulated, that new cell can develop just like a fertilized egg; before Dolly was a lamb, she was a cloned embryo and fetus. Yet Collins argues that we ought to embrace SCNT as a morally acceptable way of getting stem cells, supposedly circumventing the ethical controversies involved in using embryos. Collins avoids the hard question—what is the moral standing of a human embryo?—as apparently beyond the capacity for science or even reason to decide; it is, he seems to believe, a matter of faith. But he is certain that the cloned embryo is not really an embryo—and even suggests that in the age of cloning, when any human cell has the potential via SCNT to become an embryo, that our old moral and biological distinctions no longer make much sense.

This is all muddled in the extreme. First, the product of cloning is indisputably a human embryo; using it for stem cell research presents all the same moral quandaries as destroy-

ing human embryos made through in vitro fertilization. Second, there is a difference between “active” and “passive” potentiality, a straightforward philosophical distinction that Collins seems not to understand: the skin cell, through our many scientific machinations, can perhaps be turned into an embryo, but it is not morally or biologically similar to an embryo in any way; an embryo, unlike a skin cell, is already a complete human organism, driven to develop by its own internal powers, a life in process the moment a zygote (or a “clonote”) is formed, whatever moral standing one ultimately accords it. Finally, to cede the question of the moral status of the embryo to faith alone gets us off the hook a bit too easily; it paralyzes our capacity for natural moral reason, inviting us to rely entirely on dueling religious authorities to settle our most difficult bioethical questions. Yet it is precisely such natural moral reason that Collins’s guide, C.S. Lewis, among others, speaks of when defending the universal Moral Law—what Lewis called the “Tao.”

Perhaps the lesson in this is that the Moral Law is insufficient, by itself, to handle the novel moral puzzles posed by modern science. Perhaps, in many cases, we must rely on religious authority alone, and try to live well with those irrecon-

cilable divisions that emerge both between faith traditions and between religious and non-religious people. But before coming to such a conclusion, one would do well to seek out deeper sources of wisdom—like the many fine reports of the President’s Council on Bioethics—that advance the ethical conversation without setting faith against reason or relying on faith alone.

In light of these flaws, Collins would have been better served by addressing the bioethics in another book. Here it distracts from his true achievement of showing how we might talk reasonably and civilly about science and religion. He provides us with an important corrective to the unending shrillness that is the American conversation on science and religion. And he makes a welcome contribution to a never-finished but always necessary task in democratic societies: bringing home to the overly confident the limits of their understanding, and coaxing others to face up to and make their own the knowable truth. In this, Collins has done both his fellow scientists and his fellow believers a great service.

*Thomas W. Merrill is a tutor at St. John’s College, Annapolis.*