

Review of *The Language of God* Written by Dr. Francis S. Collins  
Reviewer: Dick Bain Aug., 2008

This is an important book for several reasons. First, it was written by Dr. Francis Collins, an eminent scientist and the head of the Human Genome Project. Second, the book fully supports the concept of the evolution of life. These two facts hardly seem surprising until you find out that Collins identifies himself as an evangelical Christian. It should be made clear that evangelical Christians are not necessarily Creationists or Intelligent Design supporters. In fact, Collins specifically criticizes both of these alternatives.

Collins makes it clear in the introduction to this book that religion and science should be partners and not enemies. His thesis is that science and religion need each other; science to investigate the facts of existence and religion to examine the meaning and value of existence.

In the first chapter of his book, Collins relates how he made the journey from agnosticism to atheism and finally to theism. A major influence in this journey was C.S. Lewis's book, *Mere Christianity*. Collins discusses Lewis's concept of Moral Law as a universal presence in all cultures and cites this as a proof of a universal spiritual presence and thus a possible proof of God. Another influence in his conversion was the faith he saw in hospital patients he worked with in North Carolina after becoming a medical doctor. He was working towards a doctorate in chemistry, but left this field to pursue medicine. He relates that his increasing conviction that God exists finally led to a leap of faith and belief in God.

In the second chapter of this book, Collins addresses some reasons people give for not believing in God. One of these is: Why would a loving God allow suffering in the world? He discusses the idea that we have free will and sometimes choose to do bad things; we can't blame our bad choices on God. Another point he makes reminds me of the saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: The person most afflicted is the person who's never been afflicted. Collins asserts that we are made better people because of our suffering; in fact, he feels that is the primary way we grow into caring people. He also states that life progresses by evolution, but evolution is a messy process. Two other difficult issues he tackles are the harm done by religious groups and the possibility of miracles. He says that some people condemn the Christian church because of the bad things it has done at times. Collins says that we shouldn't judge the ideals of Christianity by the actions of some groups of Christians. In Collins words, people are: "those rusty containers into which the pure water of that truth has been placed."

Collins points out one mistake many of the opponents of the theory of evolution make. They say that since it's just a theory, it's unproven. Collins points out that theories in science are well proven by research and data and accepted universally by scientists. A hypothesis on the other hand is unproven and could well turn out to be false. He says that the vast majority of biologists accept the theory of evolution as true.

Collins supports the Big Bang theory but asks what came before the Big Bang. Did the universe create itself? Like some theologians, he sees the Big Bang as a creative act that implies a creator. He discusses the problem of purpose in the universe and the Anthropic Principle. The Anthropic Principle says that the universe seems to be fine tuned for the appearance and survival of life. Atheists and agnostics often have a serious problem with this idea since it implies a creator. Collins states that there are 15 physical constants that are givens; they cannot be predicted or calculated, they must simply be accepted as givens. If any one of these constants were only slightly different than they are, we would not be here. He quotes astronomer Fred Hoyle, who said that it looks like “a put up job.” One alternative put forward by theorists to counter the idea of a created universe is the so-called “multiverse.” This hypothesis says that there are nearly an infinite number of different universes and ours just happens to be one that is friendly to life. Collins counters that this strains our credulity.

DNA gives the book its title: Collins calls DNA God’s instruction book. In describing the function of DNA and RNA, Collins is on home turf and explains how our genes show signs of evolution. He obviously supports the idea that humans and chimpanzees have a common ancestor, and the concept that all life on earth began as one celled life. But he acknowledges that many evangelical Christians strongly reject evolution.

Collins thinks evangelical Christians feel threatened by the theory of evolution because they perceive it as a threat their belief in God. Also, he admits that evolution is difficult to believe in because it is such a slow process that we can’t see it happening during our lifetime, at least for large animals and people. Emergence of new species occurred over eons of time. He cites the survey result that 40% of people surveyed believe that people appeared only 10,000 years ago as disappointing. He acknowledges that the root of the Evangelicals’ problem is a literal interpretation of the Bible—in particular, Genesis. Collin’s contention is that some things in the Bible were not intended to be interpreted literally. The creation stories should be seen as metaphors or allegories.

Collins discusses three belief systems and their relationship to science, especially the Theory of Evolution: atheism and agnosticism (he lumps these together), creationism, and intelligent design. Atheists and agnostics may claim that science has disproved God, but Collins says that science can no more disprove the existence of God than religion can prove it. He asserts that some creationists have lately proposed that God planted the false evidences of evolution to test our faith. He believes that such preposterous ideas have totally discredited creationism. He also believes that Intelligent Design (ID) will increasingly find itself in trouble because it resorts to the “proof by design” idea. Such proofs are known as “God of the Gaps” arguments. When there is a gap in our understanding, we plug God in to explain the thing we can’t otherwise explain. When early scientists looked at something as complex as the eye, they concluded that such a thing could not happen by a series of accidents, so this is proof of a designer—God by implication. Now biologists are finding transitional forms of complex things such as eyes. If the gaps disappear, so does the ID God of the Gaps.

Collins personally subscribes to a theology he calls BioLogos, his name for theistic evolution. He holds that God works through evolution. Though evolution appears random, God foresees the end from the beginning. The organisms appearing at the beginning of life on earth had the potential to evolve into a human being. He again affirms that you can believe in God and accept evolution. He stresses that both religion and science are needed for a complete understanding of the universe. In this regard he quotes Einstein: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."

Collins concludes his book with an appendix on bioethics. He discusses the ethical problems of genetic counseling, the use of DNA testing, stem cell debates, engineered children via genetic selection, etc. He generally comes down in a moderate position on these issues except for the idea of engineered children, which he adamantly opposes.

This is a book that we hope many evangelical Christians will read. Unfortunately, for those who firmly believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, Collins's suggestion that Genesis be interpreted metaphorically may be too great a stumbling block for such folks. Sadly, the tension between science and religion will no doubt be with us for a long time to come.