

Victor J Stenger

A lack of evidence



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The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief

Francis S Collins
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Most scientists do not believe in God for two simple reasons: they see no evidence for him; and they find no need to include supernatural elements in the models they build to describe their observations. Still, they are largely content to assign religion and science to separate domains, what Stephen Jay Gould calls “non-overlapping magisteria”. This allows non-believing scientists to dodge the topic of religion altogether, thus avoiding jeopardizing what is most precious to them – their funding. It also permits scientists who do believe in God to compartmentalize their thinking and never discuss science and religion in the same breath.

However, this is not possible if you are Francis Collins – an evangelical Christian who also heads the Human Genome Project. *The Language of God* is Collins’ personal attempt to explain how he reconciles his science and his faith. He describes giving a talk to a gathering of Christian physicians, recalling how warm smiles abounded when he told of his joy at being both a scientist and a follower of Christ. But

when he got down to the essence of his science and tried to explain how evolution may have been God’s “elegant plan” for creating humankind, the warmth evaporated from the room and some of the audience left “shaking their heads in dismay”.

Collins is fully aware of the reason the majority of Christians in the US remain unconvinced of evolution: Darwinism implies that humanity developed by accident, contradicting the traditional teaching that humans are special, created in God’s image. His explanation is that God is “outside of nature” and so knows every detail of the future. Thus, while evolution appears to us to be driven by chance, from God’s perspective the outcome is “entirely specified”. However, Collins does not say where that leaves human free will, which his argument implies is just an illusion.

Collins does a nice job of explaining his own work on genomes and DNA, saying that he personally finds it all the more awe-inspiring as the work of God. He also clearly points out the flaws in creationism and intelligent design. However, the promise in the book’s subtitle that the author will present “evidence for belief” is delivered at best inconsistently. While he admits that evolution makes the argument that humanity was designed much more complicated, he insists that God “could have” done it this way. But he fails to carry this line to its logical conclusion: God was simply not needed to do it this way.

Early on, Collins affirms what has become the disingenuous position of many scientists in the US and of organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences – that science has nothing to say about God and the supernatural. This flies in the face of the facts. Many reputable scientists are doing research that could, in principle, demonstrate the existence of the supernatural. For example, reports have been published recently by Harvard University, the Mayo Clinic, and Duke University on the efficacy of blind, distant prayer on the health of patients. The results show no bene-

fit, but it might have turned out otherwise. Imagine, for example, if the results had been positive and, furthermore, found that only certain types of prayer – Catholic, say – worked. I know I would be hard-pressed to find a natural explanation.

Collins then brings up the Big Bang, saying: “I cannot see how nature could have created itself. Only a supernatural force that is outside of space and time could have done this.” The fact that he “cannot see how” is hardly evidence for a supernatural creation. He also fails to account for the latest work of cosmologists, who no longer view space and time as having necessarily originated with the Big Bang. None of the many scenarios for a natural origin of the universe that have been published in reputable journals by first-rate physicists are mentioned.

Collins next discusses the so-called anthropic principle, which states that the constants of physics are fine-tuned for life. As the philosopher David Hume pointed out centuries ago: “There can be no demonstrative argument to prove that those instances in which we have no experience resemble those of which we have had experience.” In other words, we cannot use our experience in this universe, with its laws and constants, to infer what is possible in another universe with different laws and constants. The universe is not fine-tuned for life; life is fine-tuned to the universe.

And why would a perfect God make a universe so uncongenial to life that he would have to then turn around and fine-tune it? Earthlike planets should be everywhere. Or, if he wanted to, God could have designed life so it could survive anywhere, even in the vacuum of space. In fact, this is the basic flaw with all design arguments, including intelligent design in biology. The universe and life do not look at all designed; they look just as they would be expected to look if they were not designed at all.

But then, Collins himself did not become a believer because of scientific arguments or evidence. He tells us that his conversion from atheism to

Christianity came from essentially one source – the writings of C S Lewis. His primary piece of evidence for God is not scientific – rather, he claims that “hiding in his own heart” is the clarifying principle of “Moral Law”, which accounts for human altruism. Again Collins uses the “I cannot see how” argument. Turning a blind eye to the now vast literature proposing an evolutionary origin for morality in

humans, Collins insists that such a force can only arise from outside the material world because he cannot imagine how it could be otherwise.

No doubt some believers reading this book will be reassured that a prominent scientist is able, in his own blinkered mind at least, to reconcile science – especially evolution – with Christian belief. But it is a weak effort. If the author wished to make any sig-

nificant scientific and theological statements, he would have done better to refer to the latest literature on cosmology and evolutionary psychology, and to consult theological sources besides an author of children’s literature.

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His new book *God, The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist* will be published by Prometheus Books in 2007