

1-1-2011

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Tsark, Brandon (2011) "Book Reviews," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 4, Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss4/11>

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Book Reviews

Brandon Tsark

Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*
(New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

The relationship between science and faith continues to be a perennial hot topic. From academic and professional settings, to ecclesiological, and even at family and social gatherings, it will likely generate lengthy if not also heated discussion. Francis Collins is one of the world's leading scientists, and directed the Human Genome Project (HGP) from 1993 to 2008. He is also a Christian, and in *The Language of God*, he offers a personal account of his spiritual journey, an apologetic for his faith, and how it all relates to his work as a scientist.

Divided into three parts, Collins begins by telling of his family background and introduces his spiritual journey, of how he first became an agnostic, then an atheist. Haunted by the question of a dying woman he visited, he later went to a Methodist minister to unburden his spiritual questions. Upon receiving a copy of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, he was convinced by the logic behind the Moral Law,¹ and moved away from atheism to faith, and from Deism toward an openness to Christianity.² Part one concludes with Collins presenting an apologetic, grounded in the thought of C. S. Lewis, to common philosophical reasons for doubting the existence of God.

Part two, which can be the most challenging portion of the book for non-scientifically inclined minds, begins with a scientific inquiry into the origins of the universe and of life itself. This section culminates in Collins recounting his experiences surrounding the HGP, where he poetically describes the experience of deciphering the human genome as unveiling "the language of God."³ The conclusion of this scientific inquiry into life is that "[t]he study of genomes leads inexorably to the conclusion that we humans share a common ancestor with other living things."⁴ Collins provides further evidence of this, and concludes by underscoring how essential evolution is for our modern understanding of the natural world, while simultaneously being a source of great distress to some believers and religious communities.

At the beginning of the final section, Collins makes a brief case for an allegorical reading of the creation narratives found in Genesis. Using the life of Galileo as an example, he also highlights the fact that scientific inquiry can be a noble endeavor for Christians. He also dispels a prevalent myth by demonstrating that

¹ This phrase represents an important idea in Collins' work and faith. Collins' understanding of the Moral Law, or "the law of right behavior" (22), is grounded in the work of C. S. Lewis. He sees within human history both a quasi-universal search for God and an attempt to uphold a moral-ethical code as the strongest evidence or sign of a transcendent, divine being who placed this within his creation so that it might come to know and be in relationship with him (29). The Moral Law also includes selfless altruism (27) that defies any naturalistic explanation.

² 29.

³ 119, 123.

⁴ 133–134.

evolution is not a valid reason for discrediting faith and religion, and argues that a synthesis between faith and science must be achieved.⁵ Moving toward this goal, Collins rejects both Creation Science and Intelligent Design (ID) on the grounds that they are invalid scientific models and detrimental to the church and the faith of believers. The synthesis Collins proposes is the model of theistic evolution (TE),⁶ which he proposes to rename “BioLogos.” Drawing from the principles of TE and the prose narrative of John 1, “BioLogos expresses the belief that God is the source of all life and that life expresses the will of God.”⁷ Part three concludes anecdotally with Collins offering his personal testimony regarding his conversion to Christianity and the full and harmonious synthesis he is able to achieve between his faith and professional life’s work. In an appendix, Collins provides readers with an introduction to modern bioethical issues, and makes one final case for the reconciliation of faith and science.

Since its publication, *The Language of God* has generated a large volume of both positive and negative critique. It is truly a rare and commendable work that combines such a skillful defense of evolution and clear rejection of Creation Science and ID with a bold proclamation of faith. As a personal account of his spiritual journey and the synthesis Collins was able to achieve between his faith and work as a scientist, *The Language of God* is refreshing, sincere and accessible to a wide audience. However, as being such, his presentation is at times inelegant. Additionally, because he does not fully develop his BioLogos position and offer a systematic model that demonstrates precisely how science and faith are capable of being fully integrated, his research and argument here are unlikely to excite the seasoned scientist, theologian, or biblical scholar. From a theological perspective, his brief apologetic in Chapter 2 is an unfortunate inclusion. In a matter of a few brief pages, he glosses over theological issues, such as theodicy,⁸ that are equally important (possibly more important) to the relationship between science and religion.

In his development of the BioLogos position, Collins is right to draw upon the Johannine writings. In John 1.3–4 the author states, “Through him [*logos*] everything came into being, and apart from him nothing came into being. That which was being in him was life, and the life was the light of humanity.” Thus all of creation, that is the universe and all life within it, was created by God, *through* Christ. Apart from scripture and divine self-revelation regarding the ontological origins of creation, the mystery of the precise means through which God created everything can remain a *theologoumenon*.⁹ Thus, being as such, in evaluating Collins’ work from an ecclesiological perspective, rather than using a fact-based criterion, it might be better to use a paradigm based on utility. Rather than asking, “Is this factually true?” it might be more appropriate to ask, “Is this useful to the Christian individual and to the church?” And in regards to the latter question, for individuals who view modern science as a threat to faith, and for individuals who see faith as an unnecessary obstacle to sound science, *The Language of God* has the potential to be an immensely useful resource.

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⁵ 169.

⁶ 200. Collins provides a generic model which outlines the basic principles of TE, namely that God created the universe and all life within it via evolution, and instilled the Moral Law within humanity that it might come to a knowledge of right and wrong and desire to be in relationship with its creator.

⁷ 203.

⁸ That is, a defense of the doctrine of God, particularly in the areas of his righteousness and omnipotence, in relationship to the problem of evil. Thus the perennial question: if God is both perfectly just and all-powerful, then how is it that evil exists in this world?

⁹ That is, a matter of theological opinion, as opposed to fact or dogma.