

Religious Traditions
April 29, 2008

My personal exploration into the relationship between science and spiritual faith began in high school when I first learned about Darwin's Theory of Evolution based on natural selection. I was raised Catholic and I suppose considered myself, in a simple and immature way, to be a believer in God. However, after learning about the evidence in favor of Darwinian Evolution, the entire foundation of my worldview was shaken. Unfortunately for me (and probably many others in similar situations), a potential compliment between science and faith did not seem to be plausible. It was really quite shaking, having to make a decision between the religion that provided the moral framework of my youth and the field of scientific inquiry which I anticipated would guide my future. Ultimately my loyalties landed on the side of science, although I decided religious traditions were still important for providing moral and ethical guidance and to help maintain peace and harmony with other family members.

For reasons that I can no longer recall, I decided during that high school A.P. biology class that I want to study molecular biology in college. At first this was an exciting and daring challenge. The freshman biology classes at Vanderbilt were filled with highly motivated students who dreamed of becoming researchers, biomedical engineers, and doctors. The classes were so large and competitive that faculty openly talked about the fact that only half of the freshman biology and pre-med students would remain on that track following the current semester. It was academic survival of the fittest and I did not want to be found at the bottom of the bell curve. I persevered through those initial biology classes but it came at a high cost. It led to intellectual, physical, and emotional exhaustion. The rapid academic pace nearly caused a large scale burn-out.

Through a sequence of conversations with a friend who was also a biology student and a
after period of self-reflection, I gained some level of enlightenment regarding my own
spirituality and the need to find harmony in my life. I began to appreciate that my pursuits of
scientific knowledge could not fulfill all of the questions within me. In fact, because of the
rigorous academic pace and the amount of pressure I put on myself, increasing levels of
knowledge caused greater feelings of emptiness internally. I am not certain I can accurately
describe the change that took place during the following weeks to months, but it certainly was
dramatic. I soon realized that the purpose of my life was not to hide myself within my own
academic pursuits, but rather the true knowledge and purpose would be experienced in my
interactions and relationships with others. My new found spiritual enlightenment had profound
consequences, even in the classroom where I found myself to be more confident and more
successful without the negative side-effects of my previous burn-out.

Among Evangelical Christian groups, an acceptance of Christianity by an adult is often
referred to as being “born again”. I am not fond of the label Born-Again Christian, especially
not for myself, as I think it discounts the role of my Catholic upbringing and my personal
journey to find a balance between a desire for scientific understanding and spirituality.
Personally, I think I have been a believer in God all along with varying levels of devotion and
understanding as I have progressed in my development both spiritually and academically.
However I would be lying if I did not admit that there was a moment during my sophomore year
in college when I began to pray to ask God for guidance and forgiveness. From that moment on,
my previous skepticisms regarding the power of prayer and the importance of spirituality were
gone. Yet moving forward over the next several years there has been a continual struggle to find
a balance between science and spirituality. Many of the organized religious groups that I have

encountered put up intellectual walls that attempt to block out new scientific advances which might be perceived as damaging to some principle foundations of belief. At the same time, many in the scientific community are largely opposed to organized religion. Thus finding a comfortable balance in my own personal life has been a turbulent journey. I kept asking myself if it is possible to be both devout spiritually and a professional in an area of science.

For this assignment I read *The Language of God (A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief)* by Francis Collins. This book was intriguing to me because as the director of the Human Genome Project, Dr. Collins is one of the most prominent scientists of this generation, and yet I was most interested in discovering his thoughts on spirituality and religious faith. Prior to reading this book I was not familiar with Collins' religious views (other than a brief newspaper article I read that indicated he was a religious), but his reputation as a skilled and thoughtful researcher in the field of medical genetics caused me to anticipate that his views on religion must have a methodical basis and some level of agreement with scientific understanding. I hoped that his insights into balancing a professional life of scientific research with a personal life of religious belief would help me reconcile my own confusions.

An examination of the cover of this text reveals an obvious theme for the book. A stained-glass image of the DNA double-helix portrays Collins' views that the pursuit and understanding of scientific advances and spiritual faith can be synthesized into a single harmonious world-view. Throughout the book Collins' provides a history of discoveries that have lead to conflicts between traditional Judeo-Christian worldviews and the scientific community that embraces new levels of knowledge and understanding. He proceeds by describing his own path from atheism to belief and how he became a Christian nearly 30 years ago through a scientific process of thinking about the dilemma of the creation of the universe and

what he calls the Moral Law. His views are in favor of many scientific findings such as the universe is approximately 14 billion years old and life on earth evolved and became more complex over billions of years through natural selection. Additionally, he argues that humans were a part of that evolution. However, he argues that the presence of a Moral Law and a search for god(s) commonly found throughout all human societies indicates that humans have a spiritual component that defies evolutionary theory and supports the existence of God. He rejects the notions of Intelligent Design because it attempts to use God as an explanation for gaps in the current scientific base. When these gaps are filled in by new scientific findings it eliminates the need for God to fill the gaps, discredits those who support those views of God, and puts religion at odds with the scientific community. Collins argues that God is super-natural (beyond nature) and thus the existence of God cannot be proven nor rejected based upon scientific inquiries. Furthermore, he argues that God should not be used as an explanation for currently unexplained natural events, as this only sets the stage for God/religion to be proven wrong by scientific advances (the mistake of Intelligent Design). Collins concludes that (in his opinion) science and spiritual faith do not have to be at odds, but instead can be supportive foundations for one unified worldview. Personally, this book has been rather enlightening and encouraging. It is reassuring to know that others have grappled with the same internal questions as me, and that someone as prominent as Francis Collins has reached some logical conclusions that give me hope for a similar personal enlightenment.