

Subordinating science to religion

Obama names evangelical Christian to run National Institutes of Health

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Earlier this week, President Obama announced the selection of Francis S. Collins as the director of the National Institutes of Health. Collins, while an accomplished biologist and the leader of the groundbreaking Human Genome Project, is an increasingly outspoken advocate of evangelical Christianity who has publicly declared that Darwin's theory of evolution cannot explain the moral dimensions of humanity.

In selecting Collins, Obama clearly bypassed many qualified scientists whose appointment would not have generated controversy over their outspoken religious views. The decision was intended as a deliberate accommodation to the religious right.

In 2006, Collins published a volume entitled *The Language of God*. The title of Collins' book was suggested to him by the statement made by President Bill Clinton welcoming the first successful mapping of the human genome. Clinton, like George W. Bush a Southern Baptist, declared, "Today, we are learning the language in which God created life."

While opposing the pseudo-scientific teaching of the creationists, known as "intelligent design," Collins argued instead that there was no contradiction between evolution and religion. He claimed that god created the world 13.7 billion years ago, set evolution in motion, and then intervened from time to time in human history, as in the Christ story.

Collins claimed that there were aspects of human nature that could not be explained by Darwin's theory. "Selfless altruism presents a major challenge for the evolutionist," he argued.

Shortly after the book was published—and more than

four years after the Human Genome Project successfully mapped the genetic structure of man—Collins was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Bush.

Collins left the government-run Genome Project in 2007 and launched the BioLogos Foundation to promote his claim that biological evolution is the product of the will of god. He reportedly had differences with the Bush administration's suppression of certain areas of scientific research. He supported making use of the hundreds of thousands of human embryos discarded every year by *in vitro* fertilization clinics to conduct stem cell research. Collins supported Obama in both the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination and in the general election.

There is little argument that Collins is a fully qualified scientist who can capably lead a major research effort, as he did on the human genome. However, these advances were made in conflict with the religious views with which he has become publicly associated.

As director of the National Institutes of Health, Collins will have a different role from his position as a scientist. He will head the most important and well-funded scientific organization on the planet. Over the next 14 months, NIH will spend \$4 billion on research at its Bethesda, Maryland campus, while distributing \$37 billion in research grants throughout the United States and around the world.

Harvard experimental psychologist Steven Pinker wrote, "I have serious misgivings about Francis Collins being appointed director of NIH. It's not that I think that there should be a religious litmus test for public science administrators, or that being a devout Christian

is a disqualification. But in Collins's case, it is not a matter of private belief, but public advocacy. The director of NIH is not just a bureaucrat who tends the money pipeline ... He or she is also a public face of science, someone who commands one of the major bully pulpits for science in the country. The director testifies before Congress, sets priorities, selects speakers and panelists, and is in many regards a symbol for biomedical research in the US and the world. In that regard, many of Collins's advocacy statements are deeply disturbing."

The selection of Collins was generally hailed in the corporate-controlled media as a clever maneuver by Obama, a way of paying tribute to religion while selecting an individual who defends evolution against creationism and opposes restrictions on abortion rights and stem cell research.

Both Christian fundamentalist and Catholic groups hailed the nomination, except for those devoted specifically to the promotion of the theory of "intelligent design."

Over the past several years, Collins has become an increasingly vocal religious advocate. In his blog for BioLogos, entitled "Science and the Sacred," Collins wrote: "Suppose God chose to use the mechanism of evolution to create animals like us, knowing this process would lead to big-brained creatures with the capacity to think, ask questions about our own origins, discover the truth about the universe and discover pointers toward the One who provides meaning to life. Who are we to say that's not how we would have done it?"

British naturalist Richard Dawkins ridiculed this argument in a dialogue with Collins on science and religion published by *Time* magazine. He said: "I think that's a tremendous cop-out. If God wanted to create life and create humans, it would be slightly odd that he should choose the extraordinarily roundabout way of waiting for 10 billion years before life got started and then waiting for another 4 billion years until you got human beings capable of worshipping and sinning and all the other things religious people are interested in."

While many of his statements are worded to suggest that Collins gives full value to scientific knowledge, there have been unguarded moments when he has expressed views closer to Biblical literalism. In *Religulous*, the sophomoric anti-religion film by

comedian Bill Maher, Collins makes an appearance, in an interview where he describes the New Testament as "the record of eyewitnesses who put down what they saw."

Scholarly analysis of the textual record during the 19th century, however, demonstrated conclusively that those who wrote the New Testament actually lived as much as a century after the death of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Their often-contradictory accounts reflected various oral traditions and doctrinal trends among the early Christian sects.

Whatever the particular religious views of the nominee to head the NIH, however, the political significance of his selection by Obama is obvious. As in every significant area of policymaking—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bailout of Wall Street, the assault on democratic rights and social benefits—the Democratic administration of Barack Obama is continuing and deepening the right-wing course of its Republican predecessor.



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