

Francis Collins wins the Templeton Prize

In May, it was announced that Francis Collins was the recipient of this year's Templeton Prize. The Prize, established in 1972, by the investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton, is an annual cash award of £1.1 million (\$1.3 million) to a living person who has made 'an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery or practical works'. Recently Dr Collins was interviewed by Jonah McKeown of the *Catholic News Agency* (CAN) – some extracts from that interview are included here.

Dr Francis Collins is, in his own words, a 'serious Christian'. Others would call him an evangelical Christian. Since 2019, he has been the director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), the nation's largest medical research agency, spread across 27 institutions and centres, and with an annual budget of some \$41 billion. He is currently overseeing the NIH's collaboration with several pharmaceutical companies and government agencies to develop a vaccine against COVID-19.

He first came to prominence among the scientific community as professor of internal medicine and human genetics at the University of Michigan. There he led research teams who discovered the genes responsible for diseases such as cystic fibrosis, neurofibromatosis and Huntington's disease.

He first came to public attention in 1993 when he was appointed director of the National Center for Human Genome Research, overseeing the collaborative international Human Genome Project, which, in 2003, succeeded in sequencing the three billion DNA 'letters' in the human genome.

Apparently, his current vaccine project is one of the biggest challenges of his career and, when he is not working, he is finding solace in prayer and reading the Psalms. He has said, 'Like all crises, like all occasions of suffering, this is an opportunity where we can learn and grow. And I'm glad that I worship a God who knows about suffering.' Also, 'I pray for wisdom, for guidance, I pray for forgiveness for making mistakes along the way.'

Francis Sellers Collins was born in Virginia and home-educated until age 10. He then studied chemistry at college and graduate level followed by his MD at Yale Medical School. Until age 27 he swayed between agnosticism and atheism and was '...very happy with the idea that God did not exist and that he had no interest in me'. Then he became a Christian, in part due to C. S. Lewis' masterful book *Mere Christianity*, which lays out a rational case for God's existence.

In particular, Collins was fascinated by Lewis' examination of the basis of morality – why is there such a thing as good and evil, and why does it matter? Collins claims, 'This is where I think the most strict atheists find themselves in a real quandary. Because if they try to argue that our ideas about good and evil are solely driven by evolutionary pressures that have helped us survive, the ultimate consequence of that are that those are fictional concepts – that we've all been hoodwinked into imagining that there is such a thing as good and evil, and that we should stop paying attention to that and do whatever we please. And even the most ardent atheist has trouble with that conclusion.'

Today, Collins is outspoken about his Christian faith. He wrote a book in 2006 entitled, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* in which he describes how religious faith can motivate and inspire rigorous scientific research. From 2007, he and his wife, Diane, founded the non-profit BioLogos Foundation, which aims to foster discussion about harmony between science and biblical faith through articles, podcasts and other media. He has declared, 'I've found such joy in the ability to bring together the spiritual and the scientific perspectives that I feel this urge to share. Not to turn it into too dry an intellectual, philosophical discourse, but to talk about the joy that I have experienced and by God's grace, in being able to read God's word in the Bible and understand God's works in nature.'

Collins is, of course, aware that some research teams in the global race to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 may employ the use of human embryonic and foetal tissue derived from abortions in their work. Last year,

the US Department of Health and Human Services imposed a moratorium on NIH foetal tissue research derived from elective abortions. In a 1998 interview with *Scientific American*, Collins stated that he is, '...intensely uncomfortable with abortion as a solution to anything' and does not 'perceive a precise moment at which life begins other than the moment of conception'. And now in 2020, Collins says he considers the question of whether it is ethical to use human embryos and aborted fetuses for research is an '...important issue to think through carefully. I would be the first to say we should not be creating or destroying embryos – human embryos – for research, and we should not be terminating pregnancies for research.' Yet he does display something of a utilitarian streak. He has stated, 'But if there are embryos that are left over after *in vitro* fertilization – and the hundreds of thousands that are never going to be used for anything, they'll be discarded – I think it is ethical to consider ways in which research might make it possible to utilize that information to help somebody. And likewise, if there are hundreds of thousands of fetuses that are otherwise being discarded through what is a legal process in this country, we ought to think about whether it is more ethical to throw them away, or in some rare instance to use them for research that might be lifesaving.'

Collins says he has found it fascinating to observe how much the modern field of bioethics rests on a Judaeo-Christian foundation. 'The fact that we do value such things as benevolence, non-maleficence – that is, don't hurt somebody on purpose – as autonomy, as equity, as justice; all of those principles come directly out of the Bible', Collins has declared. 'And so, a secular ethicist who adheres to those – and they will – may not have quite the same sense that I do about the foundation on which they rest, which for me is very much God-given.'

Moreover, Collins has said if he could go back in time to talk to his 27-year-old atheist former self, he would encourage that young man to begin contemplating questions like, 'Why is there something instead of nothing? Is there a God, and how would you know if there were? What is love about? What is beauty about? Why are we here? Those are not questions where the scientific approach is going to give you much of an answer at all. Let's think about whether it's worth, before you die, giving a few minutes contemplation to that, and seeing if there's any other direction from which answers might come, other than the science lab.'

Finally, hearty congratulations, Francis, on winning the Templeton! We might at times wish your views and answers to some bioethical issues were clearer and more consistent. But we too are often muddled and the issues are thorny. That notwithstanding, we are glad that a brother in Christ is in such a powerful, policy-making position and on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:1-2 we will give thanks for you and will pray for you.

Collins will be formally awarded the Templeton Prize in a virtual ceremony later this year. A million quid, eh? – I wonder if he tithes to his church.

John Ling

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