

Religion, Science Can Be Bridged

KEY WEST, Fla. — If only William Jennings Bryan had known Francis Collins.

Maybe Bryan, who died just five days after leading the prosecution in the Scopes monkey trial, might have lived longer if he had. Although he won the case, his sudden death suggests the proceedings, during which he was savaged by the press, may have taken a toll.

And, who knows? We might never have argued at all about whether evolution should be taught in public schools had Collins been around. Timing.

If Collins is not familiar, he should be. He is the physician-geneticist who led the Human Genome Project for the National Institutes of Health and is noted for his discoveries of disease genes. Alas, he came along about eight decades too late for Bryan. But he may have entered the zeitgeist just in time for thousands (millions?) of others who have trouble embracing both Darwin and God without, as Collins puts it, their brains exploding.

Collins, an evangelical Christian who was home-schooled until sixth grade, wants to raise the level of discourse about science and faith, and help fundamentalists — both in science and religion — see that the two can coexist. To that end, he created the BioLogos Foundation and last month launched a Web site — BioLogos.org — to advance an alternative to the extreme views that tend to dominate the debate.

Yes, he asserted to a room full of journalists gathered here, **one can believe in both God and science.** In fact, says Collins, the latter does more to prove the existence of a creator than not.

This doesn't mean that Collins falls in line with those promoting creation science or, more recently, intelligent design. He merely insists that belief in God doesn't preclude acceptance of evolution.

Though his own beliefs are firm, Collins understands doubt, skepticism, and even atheism. He was once an atheist himself, believing



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only in what science could prove. As a medical student, however, he stumbled upon questions to which science had no answers. In treating dying patients, he also began to wonder how he would approach his own death. Not with as much peace as his patients of faith did, he supposed.

Having earned a Ph.D. and

a medical degree, **Collins is nonetheless a scientist with little patience for those who insist that evolution is just a theory that one may take or leave.** Most human genes, he points out, are similar to genes in other mammals, "which indicates a common ancestry."

Even so, a Gallup Poll found last year that 44 percent of Americans believe God created human beings in their present form within the last 10,000 years.

"You can't arrive at that conclusion without throwing out all the evidence of the sciences," says Collins.

The problem of not believing in evolution as one might not believe in, say, goblins or flying pigs has repercussions beyond the obvious —

that the U.S. will continue to fall behind other nations in science education. Collins says many creationist-trained young people suffer an intense identity crisis when they leave home for college, only to discover that the Earth is about 4.5 billion years old. Talk about messing with your mind.

Collins says he hears from dozens of young people so afflicted. Most susceptible to crisis are children who have been home-schooled or who have attended Christian schools. Of all religious groups and denominations, evangelical Protestants are the most reluctant to embrace evolution. Their objections haven't changed much since Billy Sunday first articulated them almost 100 years ago and revolve around the fear that acceptance of evolution negates God.

To Collins, Darwin is a threat only if one thinks that God is an underachiever. Collins doesn't happen to believe that. His study of genes has led him to conclude that God is both outside of nature and outside of time. He's big, in other words. The idea that God would create the mechanism of evolution makes acceptable sense.

Now, if only he can convince his fellow Christians.

Through the foundation and Web site, Collins is hoping to help home-schoolers and other Christian educators come to grips with their scientific doubts. Among other projects, he intends to develop curricula that combine faith and science. **He also hopes to help fundamentalist scientists see the error of their ways.**

Whatever one's stripes or lack thereof, **helping fundamentalists evolve can only be good for civilization — a cause in which even the faithless can believe.**

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