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THE CAUTIONARY TALE OF FRANCIS COLLINS

by
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On June 8, 2019, Francis Collins finger-picked his guitar and sang Andy Grammer’s song “Don’t Give Up On Me” at the memorial service for a young man who had died after a four-year battle with a rare kidney cancer. The man had enjoyed the song, and Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, cared dearly for him. He concluded his performance with an emotional benediction, promising that he would see the young man again and that he and his staff would not give up searching for a cure. This is the kind of man Francis Collins is.

One month earlier, Collins’s NIH had approved a research grant requested by University of Pittsburgh scientists who desired to graft the scalps of aborted fetuses onto rats and mice. Their research findings were published by *Nature* in September 2020 and include photos showing patches of soft, wispy baby hair growing amid coarse rodent fur. This, too, is the kind of man Francis Collins is.

Collins recently announced that this year will be his last at the NIH, bringing to a close twelve years of tireless public service in charge of the largest biomedical research body in the world. He leaves behind an ambivalent legacy. After President Obama appointed him director of the NIH in 2009, Collins became the most transformative leader in the institute’s history, emphasizing big data

approaches to health science and launching ambitious projects. These included the 10-year Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative, the Cancer Moonshot, and the Precision Medicine Initiative, which yielded All of Us, “an effort to amass a trove of data on the genomic basis of disease by collecting health records and DNA sequences from 1 million volunteers.” He was awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom, a National Medal of Science, and even appointed to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences by Pope Benedict XVI. Most recently, Collins was a steady leader during the pandemic, and instrumental in the public-private partnerships that made possible the rapid development of vaccines.

These achievements are remarkable on their own, but all the more resonant because Collins is an outspoken evangelical Christian. He showed that it was possible for an evangelical from a working-class background to rise to the heights of scientific and bureaucratic accomplishment. His presence in the halls of medical power was also a testament to the harmony of faith and reason. Collins has championed the compatibility of science and religion and encouraged Christians to accept theistic evolution through his bestselling 2006 book The Language of God and a spin-off organization, BioLogos. His witness is singular, and singularly powerful—if we don’t look too closely.

From the beginning of his tenure as director of the NIH, Collins pursued a policy of expanding embryonic stem cell research, a priority of Obama’s that likely influenced Collins’s decision to join his campaign in 2008. Collins has tried to reconcile his commitment to stem cell research with his evangelical faith. “I believe that the product of a sperm and an egg, which is the first cell that goes on to develop a human being, deserves considerable moral consequences,” Collins told Salon in 2006. “So I would be opposed to the idea of creating embryos by mixing sperm and eggs together and then experimenting on the outcome of that, purely to understand research questions.” In an interview with PBS, he added:

There are hundreds of thousands of those embryos currently frozen away in *in vitro* fertilization clinics. And it is absolutely unrealistic to imagine that anything will happen to those other than they’re eventually getting discarded. So as much as I

think human embryos deserve moral status, it is hard to see why it's more ethical to throw them away than to take some that are destined for discarding and do something that might help somebody.

At first blush this seems a compassionate response to a situation Collins would prefer had never arisen. But his is a materialist vision of compassion. It balances only the moral status of the embryo with the good that *might* result from its being experimented on. But what of the soul of the experimenters? When Collins acknowledges the immorality of research done on embryos created for just that purpose, he implicitly concedes that it is the research itself—as the *telos* of the embryos' creation—that is immoral. His argument, then, may be restated thusly: Men committed evil by creating excess embryos for IVF, so other men should commit evil in order that something good might arise.

Imagine that instead of frozen embryos, hundreds of thousands of adult men and women were stored in a suspended animation from which they will never awake. Would it be justifiable to experiment on their still-living bodies—without prior consent—even if doing so might save lives? If, as Collins claims to believe, “human embryos deserve moral status,” the moral dynamics are analogous. Unless, that is, “moral status” is meant as a palliative cipher, a vague gesture toward an embryo possessing *some* moral worth but not that of a human being.

C. S. Lewis, whom Collins admires, would be quick to admonish him that this is the worldview not of the scientist, but of the Magician, who sees nature, even other humans, as raw material awaiting the imprint of will.

Collins offered an explanation for why he resigned the directorship: He believes “that no single person should serve in the position too long.” One suspects it also has to do with the firestorm of controversies he's been embroiled in this year. While it may be possible for reasonable people to disagree about the ethics of embryonic stem cell research, some fruits of the Magician's worldview—such as human-animal chimeras—are, for almost everyone, beyond the pale.

The University of Pittsburgh’s experiment in “humanizing” rodents with fetal tissue harvested from elective abortions was just one of many such projects funded by the NIH. While this particular study was approved for funding by Anthony Fauci’s NIAID, the buck ultimately stops with Collins. Lest one assume out of charity that these grant approvals were made without Collins’s knowledge, in 2019 Collins opposed the Trump administration’s decision to ban NIH intramural research using fetal tissue and to require grants for extramural research with fetal tissue to be reviewed by an ethics advisory board. Last spring, these restrictions were rescinded with Collins’s full support.

In the year prior to the ban, Collins’s NIH spent \$115 million on fetal experimentation, a record for the institute. And since 2016, nearly three million dollars have gone toward establishing the Tissue Hub and Collection Site at the University of Pittsburgh, which traffics fetal organs—including organs from viable and full-term fetuses—from abortion clinics to research facilities. Earlier in Collins’s tenure, the NIH funded the research of Pittsburgh’s Dr. Jörg Gerlach, who pioneered a method of harvesting fresh livers from babies delivered alive at 18 to 22 weeks’ gestation, which he has used in both Italy and the United States. As David Daleiden explains, “these babies either died when they were ‘submerged’ in bags for transport, or after their bodies were cut open to harvest their livers.” The University of Pittsburgh’s house of horrors may seem like an outlier, but the callous treatment of human fetuses is also a consequence of federal regulations. As the human-rodent chimera study notes under the sub-heading “Ethical approval,” “The use of de-identified human fetal tissues *did not constitute human subjects research* as defined under federal regulations” (emphasis mine). In the same section one learns that greater propriety is shown to rats than to the remains of human children. This is the research culture Francis Collins has been immersed in for much of his career, and it’s the culture he reinforced at the NIH. It is the Magician’s worldview enacted—call it the “Magician’s Praxis.”

Dark as these revelations are, they pale beside what Collins will surely be most remembered for: funding the research that likely created SARS-CoV-2.

In October 2014, the Obama administration halted funding of gain-of-function (GOF) experiments on the influenza, SARS, and MERS viruses. Collins's NIH granted an exception to a project helmed by Peter Daszak that aimed to collect new bat coronaviruses and, using humanized mice at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, increase their pathogenicity in ways directly forecasting the functionality of SARS-CoV-2.

When the NIH resumed funding in 2017, Collins wrote that GOF research on coronaviruses such as SARS and MERS “is important in helping us identify, understand, and develop strategies and effective countermeasures against rapidly evolving pathogens that pose a threat to public health.” On May 19 of this year, however, he said something different: “neither NIH nor NIAID have ever approved any grant that would have supported ‘gain-of-function’ research on coronaviruses that would have increased their transmissibility or lethality for humans.” But as another top NIH official recently admitted, the NIH/NIAID-funded research of Peter Daszak did precisely that.

How does a sincere evangelical Christian become such a consequential champion of the culture of death? The answer may well be that the biomedical research establishment is structured in such a way that one cannot rise very high in the ranks without adopting the Magician's Praxis.

Bureaucracies homogenize and calcify elements of a worldview that helps them either to function effectively or to ensure self-preservation. In the case of science bureaucracies, this has meant the normalization and enforcement of instrumental reason; over time, this has made the metaphysics underlying ethics unintelligible to the very scientists, like Collins, who most need to see human nature clearly.

Another answer is that even though science and evangelical faith are intellectually compatible, their respective cultures couldn't be less congruent. For most evangelicals, the work Collins does is as inscrutable as their faith is to most secular scientists. Collins's position has been a lonely one. To live as a bridge between worlds is to embrace a liminal existence. Liminality presents an opportunity to imitate Christ, the liminal being par excellence. It also exposes one to an unusual, and unusually intense, temptation: the temptation to bifurcate one's identity, to make peace with

cognitive and ethical dissonance.

Francis Collins has perhaps fared better in this strange position than would have many of us. He is a brother in Christ and his accomplishments are undeniable. He is nonetheless a tragic figure, and his career a cautionary tale.

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