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The Predicament — Francis Collins, Human Embryos, Evolution, and the Sanctity of Human Life

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Francis Collins stands at the very summit of the scientific community. He successfully led the massive effort to map the entire human genome, bringing the project to completion ahead of time and under budget. He now serves as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), having been nominated by President Barack Obama last summer. He oversees one of the largest research budgets in the world and, armed with a Ph.D., a medical degree, and a long list of accomplishments, is one of the most influential scientists of the last 100 years.



Thus, you might think that the scientific world would have celebrated the elevation of Dr. Collins to the NIH. Not so. Harvard's Steven Pinker declared that Collins is "an advocate of profoundly anti-scientific beliefs." Other leading scientists said far worse. Why?

As *The New Yorker* reports this week, Dr. Collins is "a believing Christian." As writer Peter J. Boyer explains, "The objection to Collins was his faith—or, at least, the ardency of it. Collins is a believing Christian, which places him in the minority among his peers in the National Academy of Science. (Of its members, according to a study, only seven percent believe in God.)"

Putting "believing" in front of "Christian" points directly to the problem. The voices of secular scientism would be much less threatened by an unbelieving Christian — a person who would associate with Christianity, but hold to no distinctive Christian beliefs. Even more striking in Boyer's account is the linkage of "ardency" with "believing Christian." It evidently doesn't take much to be considered ardent these days.

Boyer points to the influence Collins has achieved through his books, speaking, and advocacy, and to his creation of the BioLogos website, designed "to advance his idea of the companionability of reason and faith." Of course, the main preoccupation (or obsession) of the BioLogos site is advocacy for the theory of evolution among Christians.

Francis Collins is headed into a public controversy over the use of human embryos in medical research. As Boyer explains, Collins had crafted a policy that would reverse some limitations placed on such research by the Bush administration. The Bush policy, announced during President Bush's first address to be televised from the Oval Office, limited federally funded research to a specified list of existing stem-cell lines taken from embryos and prevented any funding of research that would destroy further human embryos. Back in 1995, Congress had approved legislation [the Dickey-Wicker amendment] that banned federal involvement in any research that included the destruction of human embryos. Researchers demanded additional stem-cell lines, and some politicians promised that cures and treatments for

devastating diseases would be right around the corner.

President Obama modified the Bush policy in 2009, with assistance from Francis Collins. Collins now appears to be a forceful advocate of an aggressive broadening of research using human embryos. “It’s time to accelerate human-embryonic-stem-cell research,” he said, “not throw on the brakes.”

Peter Boyer capably traces the issue and its controversies. Even James Thompson, the University of Wisconsin scientist who pioneered the use of human embryos in this research, saw this clearly. “If human-embryonic-stem-cell research does not make you at least a little bit uncomfortable, you have not thought about it enough,” he said.

Boyer reports that Francis Collins “was personally torn by the ethical questions posed by stem-cell research” before joining the Obama administration. Nevertheless, he is now pushing hard for the expansion of such research. As Boyer explains:

He has long opposed the creation of embryos for the purpose of research. He sees a human embryo as a potential life, though he thinks that it is not possible scientifically to settle precisely when life begins. But Collins also feels it is morally wasteful not to take advantage of the hundreds of thousands of embryos created for in-vitro fertilization that ultimately are disposed of anyway. These embryos are doomed, but they can help aid disease research.

This is a very troubling passage. Defining a human embryo as merely “potential life” is an evasion, especially when the same person says that is impossible “scientifically to settle precisely when life begins.” A closer look at that statement will reveal that, once it is denied that life begins at conception, there is no real scientific answer to the question of when life does begin. An affirmation of the sanctity and dignity of every human life requires unequivocal opposition to any harmful use of a human embryo.

Furthermore, the argument that existing human embryos should be destroyed in the name of scientific research because they are “doomed” anyway fails on multiple counts. Its horrifying pragmatism would allow the use of any “doomed” human being for medical research or destruction. The argument also fails to acknowledge the moral connection between the embryo and respect for human life, regardless of the reason it was brought into being.

All this takes on a powerful meaning in light of a judge’s recent decision that the Obama administration’s policy violates the Dickey-Wicker amendment, and thus the will of the Congress. The Obama administration has pledged to appeal the decision handed down by Judge Royce C. Lamberth on August 23. Regardless of how that process eventually ends, the Obama administration — and Dr. Francis Collins in particular — will be on the hot seat, crafting a new policy.

The main thrust of Boyer’s essay in *The New Yorker* is the difficulty of this task. But there is more to the story, for Boyer asserts that Collins’ policy — the one struck down by Judge Lamberth — had “resolved the stem-cell debate.” Clearly, this assumption was and is way off the mark.

The use of stem cells in medical research and treatment is not ethically suspect, unless the cells were derived unethically — as is always the case when a human embryo is destroyed in the process. The most promising avenues of stem-cell research are using cells derived from adult cells, not from embryos. The absolute determination of some researchers to destroy human embryos cannot be explained by scientific determination alone.

Francis Collins will indeed have his hands full as he attempts to resolve this issue and craft another workable policy for the nation. But so long as he remains committed to the use of human embryos in medical research — and to the argument that there are “doomed” embryos that should not be wasted — he will serve to undermine human dignity and the sanctity of human life.

One additional aspect of Boyer’s important essay is worthy of note. Even with all of Francis Collins’ achievements, qualifications, and experience, the bare fact that he is a “believing Christian” is enough to draw the active opposition of many in the scientific establishment. Just being a “believing Christian” is reason enough for suspicion, condescension, and opposition from many. Even when Francis Collins presses his case for evolution, he is dismissed by many scientists simply because he believes in God.

In other words, when we are told that we have to accept and embrace the theory of evolution in order to escape being

considered intellectually backward, remember the opposition to Francis Collins. It just doesn't work. When Collins' elevation to the NIH post was announced, evolutionary scientist P. Z. Myers lamented, "I don't want American science to be represented by a clown."

This is the predicament of those who argue that evangelicals must accept some form of theistic evolution — the guardians of evolution still consider them clowns.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Peter J. Boyer, "[Annals of Science — The Covenant](#)," *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2010.

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