

[REVIEW]

A Flawed Attempt to Reconcile Religion and Science

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Book
Cover

The Language of Science and Faith: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions

By Karl W. Giberson and Francis S. Collins.

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In *The Language of Science and Faith: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions*, two Christian scientists, Karl W. Giberson and Francis S. Collins, attempt to bridge the oft-trumpeted chasm between religion and science. Neither their religiousness (albeit broadly defined) nor their scientific credentials can be challenged, and the latter in particular is often a problem in such works [JC: HOW ARE THEIR SCIENTIFIC CREDENTIALS A PARTICULAR PROBLEM?—JL]. Collins, for example, headed the group that first mapped the human genome and is currently director of the National Institute of Health.

The scientific community will certainly respect the sections of this book that quite rightly refute many religious fundamentalist criticisms of evolution and related science. The authors point out that these criticisms are generally based on outdated science or profound misunderstandings of science. As an example of the former, some early criticisms of evolution were based on incorrect estimates of the age of Earth. It was argued, in essence, that Earth was not old enough to permit the gradual emergence of new species that is called for by evolutionary theory. Subsequent and more accurate estimates overcame this difficulty as accepted figures for Earth's true age increased markedly.

With respect to misunderstandings about science, Giberson and Collins point out that some criticize evolution

as being incompatible with the second law of thermodynamics. But this criticism makes the incorrect assumption that the second law, which applies only to closed systems without external influences, is relevant to open systems like nature.

The authors are on firm ground with the scientific community when they endorse widely accepted scientific theories, although some believers may be reluctant to acknowledge the primacy of science as a source of knowledge about the world. And many scientists may part way with the authors as well when they insinuate a Christian God into these natural processes.

The book identifies two mechanisms for God's intervention via putatively scientific means. First, God set events in motion at the time scientists label "the big bang" in such a way that the universe and world would unfold in the way that it did, including the ultimate emergence of humans through evolutionary processes. Second, God can tweak evolutionary processes at the level of genetic mutations to steer evolution in directions that God deems desirable.

Not only will these notions be questioned by many scientists as unnecessary, but they are also unlikely to resonate with traditionally religious people's views about how God acts. Many people of faith will be reluctant to give up the idea of an active God who works through miracles, responds to their prayers, and

otherwise exerts influence on the world in mystical ways rather than by the quasi-naturalistic processes emphasized by Giberson and Collins.

Indeed, traditionally religious people will have to forsake much that they hold sacred if they are to adopt the reconciliation proposed in this book. Other sections of the book, for example, address supposed incompatibilities between religion and science, arguing that these can arise from misinterpretations of the Bible, which the authors view as a complex text requiring a hermeneutical approach to its understanding—that is, the Bible must be read analytically with careful consideration to the context in which it was written and its intended audience. To illustrate, the fact that Genesis contains two differing accounts of creation is taken by Giberson and Collins to indicate that the writer intended a figurative or theological interpretation rather than a literal description of creation. The degree to which traditional Christians will find such liberties intolerable is suggested by one Christian website that refers to the book as “throwing the Bible under the bus.”

In addition to these efforts to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, the authors argue further that contemporary science actually supports a belief in God. Their case rests primarily on the fine-tuning argument, which is distinct from the better-known notions of intelligent design and irreducible complexity, which the authors dismiss—in the process likely alienating yet another religious community.

The fine-tuning argument holds that some numerical quantities describing certain aspects of the physical world are extraordinarily well-suited to the emergence of life, that even the slightest deviation would prevent the development of life, and that this fit is so improbable as to suggest some intelligence (i.e., God) is behind the universe.

In addition to the lack of correspondence between this notion of God's influence and traditional religious

views, the argument falters on scientific grounds. The physicist Victor Stenger recently published a book titled *The Fallacy of Fine-Tuning: Why the Universe is Not Designed for Us*. To illustrate one counterargument, some constants are finely tuned for the emergence of life only at this particular point in time; a considerable range of values could actually produce life billions of years in the past or in the future. And the supposed fine-tuning of other constants is shown to follow naturally from a scientific account of our expanding universe.

Finally, the book expounds a support for Christianity in particular that obviously is derived from the authors' personal religious beliefs rather than from any evidence. Many arguments in this book are not specific to Christianity, despite repeated and often gratuitous allusions in the book to the Bible and Christian beliefs. Even if the universe was fine-tuned, for example, it could be taken as evidence for any deity with intelligence—not necessarily the Christian God.

In conclusion, the attempted reconciliation of religion and science involves a highly idiosyncratic view of both science and Christian religion, especially the latter. I therefore doubt that this book will persuade or satisfy many people, except perhaps a small minority whose idiosyncratic Christianity and theistic views of science already correspond closely to those of the authors. ■

Jim Clark is professor of psychology at the University of Winnipeg. As a cognitive psychologist and teacher of research methods, he has had a long-standing interest in understanding the human processes entailed in science and in addressing putative challenges to the efficacy of these processes for furthering understanding of our physical, societal, and psychological worlds. Religion constitutes the basis for a number of such challenges.