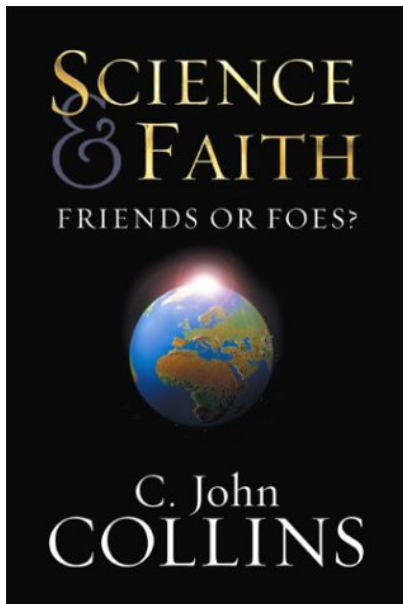


RBL 09/2004



**Collins, C. John**

*Science & Faith: Friends or Foe?*

Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003. Pp. 448. Paper. \$25.00.  
ISBN 1581344309.

Marcel Sarot  
Utrecht University  
Utrecht, The Netherlands NL-3508 TC

#### Introduction

C. John Collins, who holds an M.A. in electrical engineering and a Ph.D. in Hebrew linguistics, is currently professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. As an Old Testament scholar with a background in science, Collins is eminently qualified to write a book on the science and religion debate from the perspective of Old Testament exegesis. Thus I opened this book with high expectations. In some respects, these expectation were fulfilled. Collins's book is wide-ranging, one might even say, rich: it touches on many subjects and often clarifies them. Collins is well-informed and witty and argues lucidly. One cannot help but be reminded of the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, Collins's favorite author.

On the whole, however, I found the book disappointing. Collins answers the question posed in the title, *Science & Faith: Friends or Foes?* clearly: friends! For him, science and faith are in harmony. That would put some people off, but not me. I do believe that if faith and science were in conflict, and if this conflict were irresolvable, it would be irrational to continue believing. And since I continue to believe myself, I believe that there are no irresolvable conflicts between science and faith, and I like to read authors

who argue just that. The challenge is that in arguing for harmony one should be fair both to science and to faith. My judgment is that Collins is neither.

### Survey

Before arguing against Collins's position, let me give a brief survey of the book. After brief and perceptive introductions into science and faith, Collins argues that the two creation stories in Genesis are complementary; the second is an elaboration of the sixth day. The stories should be taken as historical descriptions of what really happened, though the days should not be taken as ordinary days but rather as eras. The Old Testament does not give an opinion on the age of the earth; the only thing one can conclude is that the earth should be at least six thousand years old. The story of the fall should be read literally, and Collins defends a "maximal" view of God's providence: "everything that happens . . . happens according to the will of God and fulfills his plan" (166). Collins cites ample biblical support for natural theology: God reveals himself in nature, and apologetics does well to build on natural revelation. Miracles—supernatural events—are not only possible, but science can even help us to detect miracles. A virgin birth, for instance, cannot take place as a result of natural causes, so we have to assume a supernatural cause (178). There is "no reason to disbelieve the standard theories of the geologists, including their estimate for the age of the earth" (250); fortunately, these are in no way at odds with the Bible. While Collins rejects (Neo-)Darwinism, he does not reject all forms of evolution and does not defend creationism either; rather, he argues in favor of "intelligent design." Finally, he defends a form of the design argument.

Collins does not apply a one-dimensional strategy to harmonize science and faith. In some instances he interprets science so that it does not conflict with faith (e.g., when he asserts that science can help us to detect miracles), while in other instances he interprets faith so that it does not conflict with science (e.g., when he asserts that the seven days of creation are eras rather than ordinary days). In practice he often pragmatically argues for a middle position between naturalism and (extreme) fundamentalism, which lends his conclusions an aura of rationality. Altogether, this is an intelligent book (though not "brilliant," as Henry F. Schaeffer III claims on the cover), and it deserves to be taken seriously. Still, as I have claimed above, I believe that Collins fails to do justice both to science and to religion. Being a philosopher rather than a biblical scholar, I will focus on his views of science and merely give some brief comments on his views of religion.

### Collins on Science: A Rejection of Methodological Naturalism

My main problem with Collins's view of science is that he "tames" science by rejecting one of its main methodological starting points: methodological naturalism, the position

according to which “science is limited to explaining the natural world by means of natural processes” and “cannot use supernatural causation in its explanations.” According to methodological naturalism, “science is precluded from making statements about supernatural forces, because these are outside its provenance” (the quotes are from a description of science from the American National Science Teachers Association [NSTA], quoted by Collins, 40). For Collins, the problem with methodological naturalism is that, in the absence of a proof of naturalism, it may be *wrong*, and other than natural factors may play a role in processes in our world. Methodological naturalism excludes these factors and thus may become an obstacle to a scientist in search of the correct explanation of a phenomenon. Moreover, methodological naturalism increases the risk of a conflict between science and religion. Finally, “the effort to promote methodological naturalism—appealing to natural processes in your explanations—slides over into philosophical naturalism—the belief that natural processes are all there is” (42).

Let us consider these objections. First, it is true, of course, that when one assumes methodological naturalism, one can never invoke supernatural explanations, not even if they were correct. Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that God raised Jesus from the dead and that his tomb was empty. If a scientist who accepted methodological naturalism was confronted with the empty tomb, he would look for natural, as opposed to supernatural, explanations. If a miracle was the correct explanation, the scientist would not be able to find a natural explanation. On the presumption of methodological naturalism, the scientist would then have to conclude something like: “I don’t understand what has happened here. I have not been able to find a plausible natural explanation. On our present understanding of the natural world, here we are confronted by an anomaly.” Collins would disagree, since he argues that “the sciences can help us to identify a supernatural event” (217): “you may conclude that an event was *supernatural* when it exceeds or overrides the natural properties of the thing involved. . . . We know that dead bodies don’t get up, walk around, talk, eat fish, and pass through doors. If Jesus did these things after he died, then his resurrection was a supernatural event” (218; see also 177–78). Even though I agree with Collins in his faith claims (I share his belief that Jesus rose from the tomb, etc.), I disagree that science could prove that supernatural factors played a role here. Scientists should seek for natural explanations and, in the absence of these, confess their ignorance. Scientists should not claim supernatural intervention, nor the absence of supernatural invention. Science cannot prove the absence of supernatural intervention, since it assumes it. And what is assumed in an argument cannot be proven by that argument—that would be circular.

Now, if one is a Christian and believes that supernatural causation is possible and does sometimes take place, why should one accept methodological naturalism? Because, as soon as one lets go of this assumption, one could invoke supernatural intervention

whenever one did not understand a phenomenon, and that would seriously undermine the progress of science and perhaps even be the end of it. Once a scientist *as scientist* argues that divine intervention must have played a role in Jesus' resurrection, the door is open to arguing that certain illnesses and weather phenomena are due to divine intervention as well. That would end the search for natural explanations and harm the progress of science. It would harm religion as well, because it would be a "God-of-the-gaps" strategy; when scientists find a natural explanation after all, what happens to our belief in God? Collins tries to avoid this objection by claiming that one should invoke supernatural explanation only "when we do *know* about the things involved shows us that their properties would never have brought this about"; in such cases, "we're talking about a real gap" (219). The problem with this strategy is, of course, that the frontiers of scientific knowledge are shifting and that what at one time seems to be absolutely beyond natural explanation may a few years after be perfectly understandable in natural terms. A scientist can never say that a phenomenon is beyond natural explanation; she or he can have doubts about the possibility of such an explanation but not be certain that it is impossible.

In short, methodological naturalism should be accepted for scientific reasons, because admitting supernatural causation into one's scientific explanations would hinder the progress of science. It may well be the case that the progress science has made in the West in recent centuries is due precisely to methodological naturalism. It should also be accepted for theological reasons, because it avoids the God-of-the-gaps fallacy. Moreover, it could well be argued that it is not by chance that the methodological naturalism of modern science rose in the Christian West. The biblical accounts of creation seem to support methodological naturalism because they—in contrast to other Near Eastern accounts of creation—emphasize that creation is not divine but has a relative independence of God. Moreover, as Collins underlines several times, the Bible supports the belief that "created things actually have *natures*, or properties that make them distinct from other things" (165), and exhibit regular behavior (178). Thus, Christian faith may well have furthered research into the rules according to which they behave (see 74–75).

How about Collins's third objection to methodological naturalism, namely, that it easily slides over into philosophical naturalism? This is a real and important worry, I think. Too often one finds that people think that there is nothing but what science can discover. The important thing to note here is that this is an assumption *about* science, not *of* science. There is nothing in science that compels one to believe that there are no "forces . . . outside its provenance." This is *scientism* (science accepted as a view of life, a functional equivalent of religion) rather than science. Scientism leads to philosophical naturalism; methodological naturalism need not lead us into the direction of philosophical naturalism,

however, but may also bring us to an increased awareness of the *limits of science*. If science *assumes* that supernatural intervention is impossible, it can never *prove* that supernatural intervention is impossible, as we have seen above. Thus, when science is well understood, it does not preclude a believer's faith in supernatural intervention. The believer may continue to believe that God raised Jesus from the tomb. And in many other cases as well science does not give the believer sufficient reason to exclude supernatural influence.

The question is, however, whether such an emphasis on the limits of science does not make us vulnerable to the God-of-the-gaps objection again. When we rely on the limits of science to invoke supernatural explanation, do we not stand with empty hands when science would come up with a satisfactory natural explanation after all? My reply is that this is not the case because in this line of thought the belief in supernatural influence is not based on the absence of a natural explanation. Let us take creation as an example: if the Big Bang theory is accepted as an explanation of the origin of the world (229ff.), that does not prove that the world was not created. A natural explanation does not prove the absence of divine influence. As Collins notes, a study of natural events can never prove that the world is cut off from the supernatural (217). The same applies to the resurrection: if, *per impossibile*, the resurrection was explained in natural terms this would not force the believer to give up the belief that God played a role in it. So the belief that God played a role does not depend on the absence of natural explanations.

Finally, if methodological naturalism does further the progress of science, then Collins's second objection must be admitted: it will lead to more conflicts with traditional Christian views. We can learn from history that Christian faith is influenced both by our knowledge and our ignorance in other fields and that scientific developments will influence our faith. But that is not a reason to avoid scientific progress! Up to now no development in science has caused irresolvable problems for Christian faith. Why should it be different in the future?

To summarize, by admitting the supernatural into scientific explanations, Collins takes away the sting from possible conflicts between science and religion. However, Collins's rejection of methodological naturalism fails, both for scientific and for theological reasons. As a result, scientists will with reason remonstrate that Collins has misrepresented science.

#### Collins on Christianity, and Especially on Biblical Exegesis

Though I am not a biblical scholar, I have received training in biblical exegesis and always kept a keen interest in the subject. Reading Collins's exegetical comments as an

interested amateur, I have learned a lot from them. Collins is obviously a very careful reader of the Hebrew Bible and is able to shed light on many of difficulties in, for instance, the creation narratives in Genesis. I would be surprised if professional biblical scholars could not profit from reading his comments. Nevertheless, my overall impression is that Collins too often simplifies complex data so as to make them fit into his harmony model of the science-religion relation.

Let me give some examples. Collins interprets the creation narratives in Genesis as history for two reasons: (1) the whole of the book of Genesis is concerned with historical matters; (2) elsewhere in the Bible creation is assumed as a fact. The second argument merely shows that creation itself is taken to be a fact, not that the Genesis narratives should be read as factual reports. And the first argument fails to take account of the differences between the primeval history in Gen 1–11 and the rest of Genesis. Even if one were to admit that Gen 12–50 is historical, that would not necessarily apply to Gen 1–11.

Collins fails to take seriously the arguments of liberal biblical scholars; instead, his attitude is one of disrespect and arrogance. About Bultmann, for example, he writes; “It is astonishing that anyone could get away with writing this. . . . Let’s give a better account of these things than Bultmann did” (216). In addition, Collins often fails to do justice to the variety of views within the Bible, using phrases such as “the Biblical view of providence” (167) and “the Biblical view of the environment” (203). In sum, while there are valuable comments on specific biblical texts to be found in Collins, his account as a whole is a simplification.

### Conclusion

C. John Collins has written an ambitious book on the dialogue between science and religion from the perspective of a biblical scholar. I have argued that the book fails in its main objective (i.e., showing that science and religion are in harmony) because Collins fails to do justice both to contemporary science and to contemporary biblical scholarship. Collins’s failure is a noble failure, however, that deserves to be taken seriously, because Collins writes well, is well informed, and adopts an argumentative strategy. In this critical review I have concentrated on his objections to methodological naturalism and tried to show why these are misguided. I do hope that other scholars will respond to other parts of the book, because also in theology only debate will lead to progress.