

Francis Collins: ‘The culture war is literally killing people’

February 7, 2022

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Former National Institutes of Health director Francis Collins said he is “heartbroken” that more of his fellow white evangelicals have not received the COVID-19 vaccines.

“I am just basically heartbroken in a circumstance where, as an answer to prayer, vaccines have been developed that turned out to be much better than we dared to hope for,” he said in a Feb. 2 interview with Religion News Service.

“And yet they are still not seen as something that a lot of white evangelicals are interested in taking part in and, as a result, people are dying. I just didn’t see that happening and certainly not at this scale.”

Faith and Science in an Age of Tribalism

Collins is the founder and senior fellow of BioLogos, an organization that seeks to foster the integration of “rigorous science” with Christian faith. He and BioLogos President Deborah Haarsma, an astronomer, spoke to journalists at a Faith Angle Forum/BioLogos webinar titled “Faith and Science in an Age of Tribalism.”

Haarsma said on the webinar the country’s divisions have reshaped views of science.

“The world has become so aggressively polarized that it seems like every issue has to land in a red camp or a blue camp, and when you view the

world that way, somehow Christian faith gets assigned to red and science gets assigned to blue,” she said. “And for scientists who are Christians, like myself and Francis Collins, this just doesn’t make any sense to us.”

Collins, who stepped down in December after 12 years as the NIH director and still runs a government research lab, spoke as a private citizen.

He tied “this red-blue situation”—including social media, political messages and words heard in churches—directly to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said it includes white evangelicals who are resistant to or disinterested in pursuing vaccines—some 30 percent to 40 percent, according to PRRI and Pew Research Center.

“The culture war is literally killing people,” added Collins, citing estimates that more than 100,000 people have died unnecessarily due to vaccine resistance and hesitancy even as “hundreds of thousands of lives” were saved.

‘Victimized by misinformation’

Collins said in an interview after the webinar many white evangelicals have been “victimized by the misinformation and lies and conspiracies that are floating around, particularly on social media and some of it in cable news.”

But he also wondered about his success in conveying the lessons from the science he has watched develop over the last two years.

“I look at myself and say, ‘Have I failed in my role as a public communicator?’” he said.

Haarsma said she understands that some resistance to vaccines and boosters has nothing to do with evangelicalism.

“There’s some people who were vaccinated once and had a bad reaction, so

they didn't want their second shot or didn't want the booster," she said in the joint interview with Collins. "And I'd like to explain to them, 'Hey, getting another shot could really help you, and you might not have a bad reaction again.'"

Her organization has online resources about the pandemic—including a February 2021 article on Christians and vaccinations that has been viewed half a million times—and has developed a curriculum on faith and science for Christian high schoolers and home-schoolers.

Truth not considered true unless from trusted source

A recent study published by the National Academy of Sciences indicates after some unvaccinated Christians heard from medical experts who shared their religious identity—including Collins and BioLogos—they said they intended to receive the vaccine, that they would encourage others to as well and that they had increased trust in those experts.

Collins explained the researchers compared a group given factual information about the safety of the vaccines and another that received the same information along with a short video clip of Collins identifying himself as a scientist and a Christ follower.

"I was pretty astounded by that," he said, adding that the findings indicated that "unless that truth comes at you from somebody you trust, you're not going to call it truth at all."

In the webinar, Haarsma mused that different public health messaging earlier in the pandemic might have averted some of the current resistance and mistrust.

She said many influencers said "trust the science," but "what a lot of

Christians hear is, ‘You want me to trust the science instead of trusting God?’”

Haarsma said messages about caring for your community or being patriotic might have been more effective. But, like Collins, she said the greater problem was “the incredible misinformation.”

In response to a question from Religion News Service, Collins and Haarsma, both of whom have musical backgrounds, concluded the webinar with a discussion of congregational singing as the country still faces the omicron variant.

Collins said it’s a “bad idea” to take off masks to sing in an enclosed space under conditions where the Centers for Disease Control advises against it—such as communities with high transmission of 100 or more cases per 100,000 people—unless everyone in that location is known to have been vaccinated and boosted, as well as tested that day.

“That’s more and more what people are trying to do in terms of making these things possible, is to go to the extra lengths of reducing the likelihood that anybody there is currently infectious,” he said. But he added quickly: “Even that’s not a guarantee.”

Collins said he has been in circumstances where he has sung with a mask on: “It’s a lot better than not singing at all.”