

Health science nominees live private faith behind public careers

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When President Obama named his choices for his administration’s two top medical posts, he chose people of private faith and public acclaim whose positions may put them out of lock step with fellow believers.

Francis Collins, 59, Obama’s nominee to head the [National Institutes of Health](#), has differed from fellow evangelicals by supporting evolution and embryonic stem cell research.

Francis Collins, who mapped the human genome, counts riding his Harley-Davidson among his many eclectic interests. President Obama has nominated Collins, an evangelical Christian, to head the National Institutes of Health.
(PHOTO/RNS/Peter Sachs)

[Surgeon General](#) nominee Regina Benjamin, 52, is a Roman Catholic who attended Catholic schools and was awarded a papal medal but, according to the White House, agrees with the president on “reproductive health issues.”

Obama’s choices reflect his hopes to “break the mold” of Washington politics and forge an administration with a wide range of perspectives, said Emilie Townes, associate dean of academic affairs at Yale Divinity School.

In fact, she said, the choices of Collins and Benjamin demonstrate “big tent” evangelicalism and Catholicism.

“They’re going to be able to speak to a variety of people about a variety of issues,” she said. “They’re not going to be lambs to the slaughter or ideologues. They’re pragmatic people who understand how to get things done but also bring a vision for something more than just how things have been done.”

Philip Clayton, a theology professor at Claremont School of Theology in California, agreed. “Both choices reflect Obama’s pragmatic idealism,” he said.

Although Collins and Benjamin are known most for their scientific accomplishments— he headed the Human Genome Project, and she was the first African-American on the board of the American Medical Association—they have each publicly addressed their personal faith.

“When as a scientist I have the great privilege of learning something that no human knew before, as a believer I also have the indescribable experience of having caught a glimpse of God’s mind,” Collins said at the 2007 National Prayer Breakfast, during which he described his transition from atheist to believer.



Regina Benjamin, a community doctor from rural Alabama, was nominated by President Obama to be the next surgeon general. (PHOTO/RNS/Courtesy Dept. of Health and Human Services)

He authored a book called *The Language of God* and more recently started the [BioLogos Foundation](#), which aims to bridge divisions between science and religion. BioLogos officials said Collins would step down from its leadership if confirmed.

“Church was always a very important part of my life,” Benjamin told *Catholic Digest* in 2007. “I believe I am carrying on the healing ministry of Christ. I feel obligated to help continue his works.”

In the rural community of Bayou La Batre, Ala., Benjamin runs a medical clinic, which does not perform abortions. The 2008 MacArthur Fellow is a board member of the Catholic Health Association and has done missionary

work in Honduras.

Still, the nominations of Collins and Benjamin have drawn some criticism.

While groups like Focus on the Family hailed Obama's selection of an evangelical for the NIH post, its newsletter noted that anti-abortion proponents cannot completely affirm his stances, "particularly since he supports destructive human embryonic stem cell research."

Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, initially gave Benjamin a ringing endorsement, saying, "Her tireless and selfless efforts are a model for all physicians." But he opposed any possible support she might give "mandated abortion coverage" in pending health reform legislation.

Catholic leaders from her native Alabama say they have not heard Benjamin voice support for abortion rights.

"She is a practicing Catholic and faithful and, to the best of my knowledge, in all those questions that have arisen so far, there has never been a conflict in her practice and in her conversation with regard to what the church expects of medical practitioners," said retired Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile, Ala., who nominated her for the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice papal medal she received in 2006.

Former Surgeon General David Satcher, who taught Benjamin as a student at Morehouse School of Medicine, said it is inappropriate to expect a surgeon general to act on religious beliefs.

"While the religion of the surgeon general may very well influence his or her ... approach, the message has to be the public health science," he said. "It's not a religious message. It's a public health science message."

Some scientists, including University of Chicago ecology professor Jerry A. Coyne, have expressed qualms about Collins. "I'd be much more

comfortable with someone whose only agenda was science, and did not feel compelled to set up a highly publicized website demonstrating how he reconciles his science with Jesus," he wrote in his blog.

But others familiar with Collins' work say there's no reason to fear his faith.

"Francis is first and foremost a scientist, and he adheres to the highest standards of research and scientific integrity," said Ted Peters, author of *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*. "These standards are shared with people of different religious faiths as well as others who have no religious faith."

Robert John Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., said there's no difference between elected officials serving as people of faith in a government position than what will be asked of Collins and Benjamin.

"If you get someone who's exemplary in their profession and they are comfortable with their own faith stance and can be appreciative of other faith stances, then that's an added value," he said.