

Expanding mystery

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

Many years ago, when I was struggling to balance the demands of divinity school and the need to produce a weekly sermon for a congregation that sat patiently and graciously through the efforts of its student pastor, I turned regularly to a little book with a catchy title, *Your God Is Too Small*, by J. B. Phillips. My dog-eared volume is the second I have owned after the first literally fell apart from overuse. Phillips addressed the widening gap between the Sunday school theology most people carry around in their hearts and minds and the broadening vistas of science that were opening up in the early 1960s.

I thought about *Your God Is Too Small* recently as I was trying to understand what exactly the scientists are up to in the Human Genome Project and how Christians might respond. So I went to the shelves and found the little paperback. When I opened it, my eyes fell on this: “Many men and women today are living without any faith in God . . . not because they are wicked or selfish . . . but because they have not found in their adult minds a God big enough to account for life, big enough to fit in with the new scientific age, big enough to command their highest admiration and respect.” Phillips’s simple point is even more relevant today.

The more I read, the more I am struck by the fact that the scientists themselves often use religious language, and that scientific discovery often seems to prompt in the explorers a reverence akin to awe and wonder—not a bad starting place for a religious journey.

A recent newspaper article titled “God, Free Will and the Genome” explained that, according to recent discoveries, we are genetically closely related to every living thing on earth, and that our genes contain relics of our evolution going back at least 800 million years. And it described how scientists such as Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, are seeing God in the project. Collins likes to refer to the genetic code as something far grander than the chemical subunits that spell out our genetic instructions. It is more like the “language of God,” he insists.

On the other hand, Edward O. Wilson, a rationalist's rationalist, insists that there is no reality other than that which science can observe and measure and analyze. His popular book *Consilience* presents the rationalist-materialist position. I can't debate scientific studies with Wilson, but it occurs to me that his God is not big enough.

I love Wendell Berry's response to Wilson in *Life Is a Miracle*. "Believing that whatever is intangible does not exist, Mr. Wilson, like many materialists, atheists, realists, thinks he has struck a killing blow against religious faith when he has asked to see its evidence. But of course religious faith begins with the discovery that there is no evidence." About science, and about research into things like the human genome, Berry observes: "The radii of knowledge have only pushed back and enlarged the circumference of mystery. We live in a world famous for its ability both to surprise and deceive us."