

NIH and surgeon general nominees combine faith, biomedical achievement: Francis Collins, Regina Benjamin

News in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

When President Obama named his choices for his administration's two top medical posts, he chose people of public acclaim whose faith positions may put them out of step with conservative believers—but in tune with White House pragmatism.

Dr. Francis Collins, 59, Obama's nominee to head the National Institutes of Health, has differed from fellow evangelicals by affirming the theory of evolution and supporting embryonic stem cell research.

Surgeon General nominee Dr. 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 to 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.

Though Collins and Benjamin are known best for their professional accomplishments—he headed the Human Genome Project, and she was the first African American on the board of the American Medical Association—they have both 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 in a speech at the 2007 National Prayer Breakfast, during which he described his transition from atheist to believer.

Collins wrote 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.

Benjamin told *Catholic Digest* in 2007, “Church was always a very important part of my life. 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, Alabama, Benjamin runs a medical clinic that does not perform abortions. The 2008 MacArthur Fellow is a board member of the Catholic Health Association and has done missionary work in Honduras. She has regularly read scripture at the Catholic cathedral in Mobile.

When she attended mass July 19, she was prayed for by her congregation in Daphne, Alabama, said Lito Capeding, a priest and the parish administrator.

Still, the nominations of Collins and Benjamin have drawn some criticism from within their religious traditions.

Groups like Focus on the Family hailed Obama’s selection of an evangelical for the NIH post, but its newsletter noted that antiabortion proponents cannot completely affirm his stances, “particularly since he supports destructive human embryonic stem cell research.”

Catholic leaders from Benjamin’s native Alabama say they have not heard her 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, Alabama, 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 Web site demonstrating how he reconciles his science with Jesus,” he wrote in his blog.

But others familiar with Collins’s 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 ethicist 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, California, also saw no conflict. “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. —*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*