Questions for *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* by Francis Collins

Introduction: pages 1-7

1) Early in his introduction Collins writes

   Many will be puzzled by these sentiments [that uncovering the human genome was an occasion for worship], assuming that a rigorous scientist could not also be a serious believer in a transcendent God. This book aims to dispel that notion, by arguing that belief in God can be an entirely rational choice, and that the principles of faith are, in fact, complementary with the principles of science (3).

   Are the *principles* of faith and science complementary? How do you believe they do (or do not) complement one another? Can you think of any specific examples?

2) Collins refers to “scientific and spiritual *worldviews*” (3); he uses the term *worldview* multiple times in his introduction. How do you understand the term worldview? Is Christianity a worldview? How does Collins define a worldview (in his introduction; see pages 6-7)?

3) On page 5 Collins offers the *central question* of his book. He writes

   In this modern era of cosmology, evolution, and the human genome, is there still the possibility of a richly satisfying harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldview? I answer this question with a resounding yes! In my view, there is no conflict in being a rigorous scientist and a person who believes in a God who takes a personal interest in each one of us (5-6).

   Do you agree that there is *no conflict* in affirming and practicing science and Christianity at the same time?

4) Collins states the goal of his book as “exploring a pathway toward a sober and intellectually honest integration” of “scientific and spiritual perspectives” on “profound questions” (6). After reviewing his profound questions, do you agree with his goal?

5) Collins states, “Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world …” (6). Is he correct?
Chapter One: From Atheism to Belief, pages 11-31

1) Consider Collins’ childhood; how was he shaped by his upbringing? What role did faith play in his early childhood (13-14)? Why did Collins prefer chemistry to biology (14-15)? How did he rekindle an interest in biology (17-19); what were the multiple reasons he discovered?

2) Collins describes his undergraduate state as agnostic (15); what was the root of his agnosticism (16)? On what basis did his agnosticism transform into atheism (16)?

3) Collins writes

   Suddenly all my arguments [for atheism] seemed very thin, and I had the sensation that the ice under my feet was cracking. This realization was a thoroughly terrifying experience (20).

What first caused Collins to doubt the truth of atheism (20)? Why did Collins find the doctor-patient relationship overwhelming (19)? What did Collins decide to do in response to his doubt (21)?

4) A Methodist minister gave Collins a copy of Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis (22-23). Collins describes what he found as he read

   The argument that most caught my attention, and most rocked my ideas about science and spirit down to their foundation, was right there in the title of Book One: “Right and Wrong and a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” (22).

   The concept of right and wrong appears to be universal among all members of the human species ... thus it seems to be a phenomenon approaching that of a law, like the law of gravitation or of special relativity (23).

What makes the moral law so appealing to Collins? Is the moral law proof that God exists? How does the behavior of all men and women, when confronted by their own wrong-doings, demonstrate the moral law (23)? Why does the moral law only apply to human beings (23)?

5) What two objections to the moral law does Collins introduce (23-25)? Do either of these objections trump the moral law? How does Collins challenge each objection?

6) What is Collins’ major example of the moral law (25) and why does he regard is as overwhelming proof of the moral law (28-29)? How does agape (27) fit into this example?

7) What does Collins conclude about the moral law (29)? What does this law suggest to Collins (29)?

8) Why does Collins believe God is a personal God, a God “who desires some special kind of relationship with those creatures called human beings” (29)?

9) Did the moral law make Collins comfortable or ill at ease (30)? What two things became clear to Collins (30-31)? What was he forced to admit (30)? And what did he decide to do in response (31)?
Chapter Two: The War of the Worldviews, pages 33-54

Note: as you read this chapter please consider the theme of personal experience.

1) Do you agree with Tillich's quote: "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." (33)? Is it true that a world of "airtight" evidence for God would be a world "full of confident practitioners of a single faith" (33-34)?

2) Collins describes one category of doubt as “perceived conflict” (34) between science and religion. He focuses on four of these perceived conflicts: belief as wish fulfillment, religion as dangerous, love incompatible with suffering, and miracles as irrational. Can you relate with any of these doubts?

3) What is wrong with the argument "The idea of God is just wish fulfillment,” in Collins view? How is desire or longing associated with the mystery of God (35-36, 38)? Why does Collins use his own personal experience and our own experiences of longing to confirm the existence of God?

4) Why do atheists mistrust any personal longing after God (37)? How do they explain it away? What is logically wrong with these explanations (37-39)?

5) In Collins’ words, “What about all the harm done in the name of religion?” How is the moral law a defense of God in light of the perceived harm done in the name of religion (40)? What of religious hypocrisy (41)?

6) What does Collins mean by “the emergence, in many churches, of a "secular faith"(41)? Is it correct to use the term "emergence" in describing those of “secular faith”?

7) Collins points out that we have all experienced suffering (42), both harms inflicted on our person and harm springing from the suffering of those whom we love (44). How does Collins separate “moral evils” from “physical evils” (44-45)? Whom does he blame for moral evil?

8) How does Collins explain physical evils (45-47)? Why does Collins’ personal experience with suffering demonstrate to him the love of God and why does Collins respond to suffering by trusting God (45-46)? Does your suffering bring you closer to God? Does God work in your life, through your adversity?

9) In Collins’ own words, “How can miracles be reconciled to a scientific worldview?” (47).

10) Collins writes, “A discussion about the miraculous quickly devolves to an argument about whether or not one is willing to consider any possibility whatsoever of the supernatural” (51). Collins distinguishes between natural processes and miracles (52); is this division accurate?

11) Are all miracles purposeful (53)? Is Polkinghorne correct that miracles are a form of revelation (53)?