

THE ALEPH COURSE.

3 : CHRISTIANITY ?

Why choose Christianity ?

Why not ? Once we get to the point of being interested, we have to choose something.

How would you choose ? What criteria would you use ?

So far as I know, there isn't any a priori evidence to suggest that one is unambiguously the best.

It's sensible to choose one of the established religions - there are plenty of people to say that it works.

All I have. But I've tried (some of) the Christian experiments, and they've worked. That's NOT A PROOF - but it's encouraging, and I have nothing to suggest I should stop and try something else.

NOTE.

I should warn you that my approach is not the usual approach. My experiments have led me to an unorthodox variety of Christianity. I have some difficulties with what many consider to be central doctrines of Christianity - but I have no doubt that I'm a Christian, and every reason to believe that God accepts me as such.

There's a message in that : if you are deterred by doctrines which you find it hard to accept, persevere. Real Christianity is too important to give away for doctrinal reasons. Jesus is not recorded as making many statements about doctrines, and some of those are negative. People have made the doctrines, and people can be wrong.

Other religions : are they true ? I don't know. If Christianity ever lets me down, perhaps I'll look, but it hasn't.

What is Christianity ?

First lesson : Don't ask, or observe, a Christian; a lot of us are very bad at it.

(But a few of us are very good at it. The good ones and the well-known ones are not necessarily the same.)

Some standard answers :

Following the teachings of Jesus, as described in the Bible.

A large collection of doctrine, amassed by the church over the centuries. (Which church ?)

NEITHER OF THOSE WILL DO. Recall that we're trying a SIMPLE approach -

- so we want a SIMPLE hypothesis to try out.

- and both of those are EXTREMELY COMPLICATED.

(So are most doctrines, which is another good reason to ignore them, at least for the moment.)

The complicated assumptions won't do because they might be inconsistent, and they're much too big to check. We MUST start with consistent assumptions, or our arguments might be wrong.

The Bible IS inconsistent - so I'm not offering any of the versions of Christianity which require you to accept that the Bible is the ultimate truth. (Some will say that it only appears to be inconsistent, and is in fact consistent if rightly interpreted. But how do you know whether you can trust the interpretation ?)

Doctrines can change. Not many years ago, it was impossible to have women priests. In some parts of the church, it still is.

Anyway, if the complicated assumptions are not inconsistent, we'll get there eventually by adding the bits one by one.

But you have to start small.

WHERE SHALL WE START ?

Here's a possibility; I've put it as two parts, but we've already discussed one :

- 1 : God is a person;
- 2 : God loves us.

The first of those we've covered already; I chose the second because it is a central principle of Christianity as I understand it.

THAT'S MY CHOICE.

And that's what I'm going to talk about here.

But I CONJECTURE that it doesn't matter a lot. It should be possible to start with any sufficiently simple Christian principle, and to proceed HONESTLY from there.

And presumably you could try it with any other religion.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY "HONESTLY" ?

- make sure your arguments are sound;
- don't accept glib (though popular) non-answers;
- and probably much, much more which hasn't sprung immediately to mind, but which amounts to being careful and meticulous in your thinking.

This won't work if God is (from our point of view) illogical, but I know of no evidence to that effect. I do know that human logic serves us well, so I shall stick with it until someone can convince me otherwise.

AN EXAMPLE. (A BIG one.)

If God loves us, why does He allow pain ?

Common version : "I can't believe in a God who could make a world in which there is so much pain and suffering."

Logically parallel assertion : "I can't believe in a government which could try to reduce the amount of money spent on universities."

Response : Why not ? You can't just choose not to believe in things which happen to offend you.

Better (not guaranteed perfect, but at least it's an improvement) :

If God loves you, and you are in pain, then either God can't do anything about it, or God chooses not to do anything about it.

If God is omnipotent, then He can do something about it - but if you're going to assume that you have to recognise that it's a new assumption. Another possibility is to put off the question of omnipotence, but to accept (perhaps) that God can heal the body, and can therefore (probably) do something about pain. Or, of course, you can simply assume that God can't do anything about it, in which case there isn't a problem.

If God can do something about pain, and you still hurt, then He chooses to do nothing about it. If He loves you, then that must be because not doing anything about it is better for you in some way.

In what way ? - I don't know, but perhaps that's analogous to a child's inability to understand why it isn't allowed to eat all the chocolate at once. "I can't believe in a mummy who wouldn't let me eat all the chocolate now" ?

I don't claim it's perfect; I do claim it's better argument. It gives us more assumptions, and more questions, but that's how the method works. Compare science.

THE NEXT STEP.

In science, you don't stop there. You look for a model which will account for the puzzling observations - which is to say, you make more assumptions. ("Let's suppose that there are atoms ...")

In this case, we can do the same.

I CONJECTURE that it is connected with God's wish that we exercise
FAITH.

I said that I believe in atoms. In practice, it goes a lot further than that. The hypothesis of atoms works so well under all relevant circumstances we've found so far that I accept the hypothesis without any serious question unless I'm going out of my way to be philosophical.

Perhaps God doesn't want to be accepted without serious question.

If Christians - or even everybody - were mysteriously free from pain in circumstances where things were eating away at their nerves, then it would be getting suspiciously close to an experimental demonstration of a supernatural power.

My introduction of FAITH is important. Clearly, it's another assumption, but it proves to be a very fruitful one. That it is already deeply embedded in ordinary Christian thinking doesn't make it wrong.

We've got there from an argument about pain; it's linked to many other notions in a rather consistent way. (For example, it's deeply embedded in ordinary Christian thinking.)

We accept science not simply because it's a lot of bits that work. It is very important that it's a lot of bits that work, and are all mutually consistent; science holds together as a whole. Most things are linked to lots of other things - it's very impressive.

Christianity holds together in just the same way - the example of faith demonstrates it. It has been there in the scriptures for around 2000 years, but now our quite different approach has led us to the same place.

WHY FAITH ?

It is not unreasonable to ask why God should wish us to have faith in Him without giving us the sort of "evidence" we have for atoms.

I don't know. Further, I don't think it's unreasonable that I shouldn't know just why God does things His way, any more than that the child should know why its parents make the decisions they do.

But I wonder whether it might simply be that a lack of certainty is a healthier way to be. In ages when the absolute truth of Christianity appears to have been widely accepted without question, I don't know that society as a whole has been deeply imbued with loving God and loving neighbours. My impression is rather that God has been seen as a solved problem, rather like atoms, to which we need pay no particular attention. (Those sentiments might be better evidence of my profound lack of historical knowledge and understanding than of the point I'm trying to make, but I think there's something in them.)

I think it's arguable that a faith which is a constant yearning that the world should be blessed with values determined by a loving God, kept alive by never quite knowing all about it, could be preferable to a comfortable certainty which reduces God to a commonplace. (And this isn't a new idea either; "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part ... now we see through a glass, darkly", wrote St Paul, around 1950 years ago. (*1 Corinthians* 13.9,12))