

# THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

## 3 : CHRISTIANITY.

LAST TIME : We want some assumptions about God; religions are an obvious source. We ( I ) chose Christianity.

THIS TIME : Look for a plausible assumption ( or two ) in Christianity; see what happens.

### CHRISTIANITY AS A CHOICE.

It IS a choice. Nothing I've said yet suggests that Christianity is special. All I want is a religion, because people have claimed to have done the experiments, and found that they worked.

*Nothing I shall say later will suggest that Christianity is special either.*

I have no experience of my own which can lead me to that conclusion.

I have heard Muslims explain that Islam is superior because of certain facts about Christianity which are certainly not facts in my Christianity.

Christians have told me that Christianity is superior because of certain facts about other religions which don't always seem to be facts when you find out more.

Most of these notions are based on comparing the doctrines of the various religions. As I've already hinted, and as I'll certainly hint again, I am deeply suspicious of doctrine. Reviewing my experience as a Christian, I find that little, if any, of it depends on the sort of doctrine about which people argue. I conjecture that other religions are similar in this respect.

Certainly, I couldn't infer much about *being* a Christian from the creeds. It's taken me - let's say - twenty years of practice to learn about it, and I'm still learning. If I wanted to compare Christianity with ( say ) Hinduism, I'd expect to have to spend another twenty years or so doing that.

And that isn't going to happen.

I DO KNOW THAT CHRISTIANITY WORKS. And that's all I can say about the comparison. That's experimental evidence, and a lot of other people have found the same.

### WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY ?

You can DESCRIBE it, in a historical sense :

Christianity is a development of Judaism, thought to have grown from the teachings and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, around 2000 years ago.

Can you DEFINE it ?

YES ! - in many, many different ways.

Every Christian sect ( perhaps every Christian ? ) has a definition of some sort, and they're all a bit different. Some of them are contradictory. All of them are more or less complicated. ( That's significant, because we're seeking a SIMPLE assumption to carry on our discussion. )

### EXAMPLES :

- Follow the RECORDED TEACHING OF JESUS ( not a specific definition, but characteristic of several ) - BUT
  - there are many records in the Bible;
  - they're not all perfectly clear;
  - how do we know the Bible has recorded them correctly ?

- THE APOSTLES' CREED :

|  |  |
|--|--|
| I believe in God, the Father almighty,       | maker of heaven and earth.             |
| And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, | who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,   |
| born of the Virgin Mary,                     | suffered under Pontius Pilate,         |
| was crucified, dead, and buried,             | He descended into hell.                |
| The third day He rose again from the dead;   | He ascended into heaven,               |
| and sitteth on the right hand of God, the    | from thence He shall come to judge the |
| Father almighty;                             | quick and the dead.                    |
| I believe in the Holy Ghost,                 | the holy catholic church,              |
| the communion of saints,                     | the forgiveness of sins,               |
| the resurrection of the body,                | and the life everlasting.              |

WHOOOPS !

We wanted something small and simple. Neither of those examples is either small or simple.

We NEED something small and simple, or we can't proceed in an orderly way. The traditional statements are TOO COMPLICATED.

And that's not just me talking. Jesus is recorded as saying that a little child is a good model for a Christian. ( "... unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Let a man humble himself till he is like this child ..." ( *Matthew* 18.3,4 ) I don't think He's ever recorded as saying just what that meant, but it's commonly taken to suggest that being a Christian is within the capacity of anybody.

Which is not true of the doctrines. So PERHAPS WE DON'T NEED THEM.

So WHY DO WE HAVE THEM ? I think that there are two reasons :

- People like trying to find out how things work. ( Which is precisely what I'm trying to do in this course, so beware ! )

That's what scholarship is about. We look at something, and try to make sense of it. It might be a poem or a moral system or a machine or a painting or a tree or a society or the Bible or whatever - we inspect it, and try to build ourselves a model which makes sense of it, ties its parts together, shows how one part affects another, and so on.

Whether or not the results are true depends on how we've gone about the task. If we've been careful and honest, then they won't be false. ( They might be guesses. )

Whether or not the results are useful is another matter. If they're false, they won't be useful; otherwise, if they help us to understand the object of the investigation, then they're useful. But that might depend on who's trying to understand. ( I sometimes read reviews of paintings which leave me more confused than when I started. )

- We like making rules.

It's easier than thinking. Mathematics students - "Give us a formula". ( Increasingly, university students too. )

But St Paul had an insight around 1950 years ago. Writing to people of the new-born Christian church : "... you are no longer under law, but under the grace of God" ( *Romans* 6.14 ). ( After that, he rather spoils the point by proceeding to lay down what amount to his own set of laws, but that's by the way, except that the church has eagerly seized on the new laws, added many of the old to them, and conveniently forgotten Paul's original saying. )

There's a place for rules - provided that you remember that it isn't THE BOOK OF RULES; it's only the book of rules. Rules are good as guidelines for the common cases, but they can't cope with uncommon cases. ( Unless you make them uncommonly complicated, and that spoils the point. )

So perhaps WE CAN CONDENSE IT.

Even better - it's been condensed for us, and by an expert. If Jesus counts as an expert. Jesus, asked which was the most important commandment, reduced the Jewish law to two things - one and a half, in effect :

- Love GOD;
- Love OTHER PEOPLE.

- and said that everything else ( "ALL the law and the prophets" ) depended on these ( *Matthew 22.35-40* ).

So I think it's fair enough to follow His example.

BACK TO THE ARGUMENT.

We're looking for a simple assumption about God; Jesus gave us two principles for running our lives, which are not quite what we want. But they point the way, and it seems reasonable ( and is in accord with many other Biblical passages, in both Old and New Testaments ) that an appropriate assumption is

GOD LOVES US.

How does that work ? Consider an example.

PAIN is a topic which worries people. It is not uncommon to read a statement something like :

"I can't believe in a God who would create a world where there  
is so much suffering".

It is tempting to wonder whether people who make such statements are really looking for an excuse not to think about God - because they make just as much sense as

"I can't believe in a car which can run over people".

I suppose that you can, if you choose, simply refuse to believe in ideas which you find disagreeable, but it isn't realistic. The existence of God doesn't depend on whether or not you approve of pain, any more than the existence of cars depends on whether or not you approve of accidents; there's no obvious requirement that God must necessarily be benevolent.

Indeed, it is a good deal more sensible to suggest that the fact of pain in the world brings into question the assumption I've just made, and this is much closer to the point - which is that we see a conflict of some sort between a loving God and hurting people. This is often seen as a big problem. I'm not going to offer a solution, because I think that looking at it as a problem is a mistake.

If you want to stick with the assumption ( and I do ) the conflict is just a fact. In response, we might consider this specific question for discussion :

If God loves us, why does He allow us to suffer pain ?

As it stands, it's just a question, and a perfectly reasonable question. It only becomes a problem if we suppose it to be some sort of anomaly - if we decide that God is doing it wrong by letting us hurt.

But is it really up to us to make that decision ? Could it be that God knows better than we do ? I believe ( and hope ) that He does ( NOT a new assumption - part of "God is bigger than we are" ), so let's look at the question more closely.

We first notice that it depends on some HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS. It's interesting to look at some just to see how they creep in. It's also a matter of HONEST ARGUMENT; if you're sloppy with your assumptions, you don't know whether or not the results are reliable. It's assumed that -

- PAIN IS NOT GOOD FOR US. If pain were good for us, why wouldn't a loving God give us lots of it ? All we know is that we don't like pain, and it is certainly not self-evident that it's good for us to have everything we like - or that we like everything that's good for us. It has been suggested that suffering improves character, or is good for the soul; I'm not going to take up these suggestions, but they're not impossible a priori.

- PAIN MATTERS. If pain were morally neutral, then if it just wasn't important why would God worry about it ? WE think it's important; but God might know better.
- GOD IS ABLE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE SUFFERING. This is a traditional Christian assumption, but it's one we haven't made yet. I'm not worried about it, but it is important to know what you're assuming, or your arguments might be faulty.

There might be more, and you can present them in different ways. For the moment, though, we'll assume the conventional answers, and ask the question again :

If God loves us, why does He allow us to suffer pain ?

The answer will have to be something along the lines of :

If He intervened to stop the pain, it would somehow be worse for us.

Compare : "If Mummy loves us, why doesn't she let us eat all the chocolates at once ?"

What would be worse ? - Perhaps a world in which we were always happy ?

We need a physical nervous system to warn us of injuries. And would love be love if there were no pain at betrayal, or parting, or death ? And if these mechanisms were miraculously suspended, wouldn't that come near to the sort of evidence I don't expect to find ? If God manipulated the universe every time we ought to hurt, we'd notice. And experience suggests that isn't His intention.

So do we hurt because God doesn't want to be conspicuous ? How can God's reticence be so important that we have to hurt for it ?

He seems to want us to have

FAITH.

This isn't a new idea either. St Paul classes it with love, and with hope, as one of the three enduring qualities ( *1 Corinthians* 13.13 ). If it's right, it fits in very well with the difficulty in finding hard evidence.

But *WHY* ? I can't answer that, but I can conjecture : There is no real evidence for atoms, but nevertheless I believe in atoms to the extent that they are a commonplace, which I accept without question. Perhaps it's better for us that God should not be a commonplace. If He always stepped in when we were uncomfortable and fixed things, He'd be a public utility, and simply taken for granted. As it is, we are required to make a DECISION. And I think that might be important.