

# THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

## 4 : EVIDENCE.

FINISHED the first three - "why bother with Christianity ?".  
( Search for real VALUES led to GOD; search for nature of God led to CHRISTIANITY as one possibility. )

NOW : three on how it fits today's world. This one - looking for evidence.

BUT I KEEP SAYING THERE ISN'T ANY EVIDENCE.

No, I don't - I say that, strictly speaking, there's no evidence FOR things. There's plenty of evidence, and some of it works as evidence AGAINST specific assertions.

I want to consider where we might look to find evidence relevant to the things we've been discussing.

And if we find a set of assumptions that fits in with the available evidence, we might be inclined to think well of it.

ASSUMPTIONS THAT WORK.

First, it's worth repeating that millions of people, today and over the last two millennia, try out the Christian assumptions in one way or another every day, and they believe that THE ASSUMPTIONS WORK - which is to say that they get the results they expected.

That doesn't prove anything, but it's a nice reassuring fact. And it's particularly nice in that IT'S HAPPENING NOW. It is good to have the Biblical accounts, but if that were all we had we could shut up shop. If God is alive and well, we want to see something of what He's doing.

But the old accounts are still important, because they show that what happened then is essentially the same as what happens now. There are many other records in the Christian literature of 2000 years which make it clear that this consistency has been maintained. Different ages have seen things in different ways, but the basic ideas have endured.

But perhaps that's not enough for you. You might be inspired by my frequent references to science, and want to try a more systematic approach. You might, for example, say -

LET'S TRY AN EXPERIMENT.

*What sort of experiment would you like ?*

Oh, something pretty direct. Something that tests God's abilities.

*Such as what ?*

Something easy to see, so we know what's happening. Perhaps healing ? - that's something we hear a lot about.

*How would you propose to do it ?*

Well, we could break your arm, and you tell us what prayers to say to get God to put it right.

*WAIT A MINUTE !!!!!*

That isn't how it works. Recall my comments on FAITH; if that really is important, there won't be any experiments like that, because it would tend to make God a commonplace of our lives.

Notice that's the "right" sort of argument; starting with the hypothesis, we infer something - which in this case turns out to be a reason for *not* doing the experiment.

But wouldn't God think it more important to heal your arm than to worry about what He looks like ?

*No. Why should He ? My relationship with God is much more important than my arm.*

But many people believe that God does heal people.

*So do I. I don't really know why He chooses to heal sometimes and not to heal at other times - but I rather wonder whether healing happens if it will really help someone's faith.*

But if He were to heal your arm, it would help our faith no end.

*It probably wouldn't. Miracles are not particularly good at inducing conversions. You might be impressed at the time, but a few days later you'd find it very easy to explain away as a coincidence or a trick. Even Jesus's miracles, as described in the Bible, seem to have generated more curious crowds than convinced converts.*

#### SO WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH ?

Nothing. It's alive and well. But these are reasonable consequences of our hypotheses - if God wants us to believe by FAITH rather than by STATISTICS then we're not going to be able to do traditional experiments.

But that's predictable too. Consider this sequence of increasingly soft sciences :

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Experiments are -</i>
Physics	Totally reliable
Chemistry	Just a bit fuzzy, but pretty good.
Biology	Statistical
Sociology	Unreliable. Use ??????????
Psychology	Rely on subject's cooperation ( or ignorance )

As the subject matter gets "cleverer", the experiments become increasingly hard to do and less reliable. And now consider the next step -

Theology	Impossible
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Not unreasonable, really.

#### A FANCIFUL EXAMPLE.

Eager for academic fame, I decide to start a brand new scientific discipline. After some study, I choose to devote myself to the scientific study of burglars, which I call *burglarology*.

I go through much the same sort of process as I've been describing. I make some assumptions :

- That burglars exist.
- That burglars are attracted by expensive objects. ( I avoid "valuable" - we don't want to get confused, do we ? )
- That burglars will take away things which attract them.

Now I can start.

- 1 : I want to study burglars in action.
- 2 : I plan an experiment. I place a valuable jewel on a table in a room, with a window visible from outside. I train a television camera on the table, and record its output on a video recorder.
- 3 : Being a responsible scientist, I publish my plan for peer review.
- 4 : I try the experiment.
- 5 : The jewel disappears - but unfortunately there is no record for analysis, for the power to the camera was mysteriously switched off before the jewel was touched.

Hm. Not quite the intended effect. Burglars are clearly shy as well. So let's make sure that the whole of the experimental area, including the recording machinery, is in view in some way.

- 6 : I design a new experiment, using two battery-powered camera-recorder combinations watching each other and the new jewel.
- 7 : Still being a responsible scientist, I again publish my plan for peer review.
- 8 : I try the experiment.
- 9 : The jewel disappears - but there is still no record, because the camera-recorders disappear too.

AND THE MORAL IS - if your subject is intelligent, knows what you're doing, and doesn't want to be experimented on, then the experiment isn't likely to work.

DOES THAT APPLY TO GOD ? Pretty well, if we take the assumptions we've made and add another traditional one to the effect that God does know what we're thinking.

#### OBSERVATION.

So we are reduced to observing the world, and what happens in it, and we have to make our model fit that. ( That's all we can do in astronomy, and that's a respectable science. It's also favoured in the social sciences, for reasons not too different from those we've just discovered. )

So WHAT SORTS OF THING MIGHT ONE WISH TO OBSERVE ? I think that two sorts are of particular significance in practice -

- The change in other people's lives on "conversion".

These are often significant.

They are sometimes dramatic; drunks really do sober up, thieves reform and confess, etc.

- What happens in your own life.

*This isn't "real" scientific evidence; you can't repeat the experiment, and no one but you really knows what's happened.*

But you can certainly observe it, and take it into account.

My life changed beyond recognition, though not all at once. I don't know what it looked like from outside. I've never been a drunken criminal, so there wasn't much high drama, but I never felt any urge to put myself out for other people. I'd have laughed at any suggestion that I should join a discussion group like this, much less lead one. Further down inside, my reasons for doing things have changed completely.

If you care to look, you'll find other things too. A few examples at random :

- Healing happens - I've already mentioned it.
- There are repeated reports of penurious missions or services getting windfalls of amounts which just cover their immediate needs.
- There are many Christian service organisations. ( Too many, because of the denominations, but it's impressive anyway. )

Unfortunately, IT ISN'T ALL POSITIVE.

Christians and Muslims are killing each other in Indonesia. ( And in Yugoslavia, where everyone is killing everyone. ) Christians are killing Christians in Northern Ireland. There are persistent tales of abuse in Christian schools. The church is not always a very good landlady. Christians are well known to be kill-joys and bigots. And so on.

Is this another example of God carefully blurring what might otherwise be clear evidence of His existence ? Does God make a suitable proportion of Christians belligerent, abusive, exploitive, or just plain nasty ? I can't tell, but I think that in this case He doesn't need to - we can do the job far too well for ourselves. Consider some points which we've already noticed :

- God doesn't force Himself on us.
- God doesn't instantly smite the evildoer.
- Anybody can join the church.
- We appear to have free will ( not previously mentioned ).

Left to our own devices we'll turn up a few people who'll be ready to compromise a bit to further their own causes, and plenty more who'll find the blend congenial and accept it unquestioningly. By no means all such are deliberately exploiting the church, though some seem to be. Many are just trying to do their best with a limited understanding of what sort of best God wants.

Blends of Christianity and nationalism are common. ( God is an ENGLISH gentleman. ) Christianity can equally be linked with privilege. ( God is an English GENTLEMAN. ) Today, God is often found to be green, or obsessed with rights. Compartmentalisation is another source of distortion. A Christian financier put in charge of the church's investments is quite likely to go all out for more money to use for God's purposes - without worrying too much about where the money's coming from. After all, that's what investment is about, isn't it ?

#### SO WHY SHOULD YOU ACCEPT THE "RIGHT" OBSERVATIONS ?

I don't really know, but here are two suggestions.

- Remember the assumptions. If something is happening that doesn't fit in - in most cases, particularly with "God loves us" - then regard it with reserve. ( I picked that one because it fits all the examples I gave above. )

In effect, this is believing because you want to, but there's nothing wrong with that. If you want values, and want God, then you continue to explore and apply your assumptions to classify the observations.

- Use the right equipment. This might need a bit more explanation.

If you can't do "real" scientific experiments, and God doesn't push Himself upon you, what can you do to improve your chances of seeing God at work ? Can you somehow set yourself up to be particularly receptive to God's activities ?

It seems so. "A broken and a contrite heart wilt thou not despise." ( *Psalm 51.17* ) If you're desperate for help, you're more likely to find it. It seems to be true. BUT -

- Well, if you're desperate you'll grasp at any straw, without being too critical.
- Yes, but if you find that the straw still supports you when the desperation has passed ?

RELIGION IS A CRUTCH ? - Why not, if you're a cripple, lacking ( say ) values ? Note that a crutch is an exceedingly useful and practical device. ( Of course, if you haven't noticed that you're a cripple ..... )