

## Brief preface to my Testimony

Graham Swinerd, April 2010

I wrote the accompanying testimony in mid-2002, just a few months after I had come to faith, so that when David Couchman asked me if he could put it on the Focus website I had to decide whether to update it, or publish it in its original form. After reflection, I decided to leave it in the original, but this posed some minor issues regarding how science had progressed in the interim. I am very well versed in the physical issues of fine-tuning in cosmology, since this is related to my profession as a space scientist at the University of Southampton. However, the issues of biochemistry and evolutionary theory are outside my professional experience.

Despite this, however, I made some observations all those years ago about the issue of ‘creation *versus* evolution’, which I have to admit were more opinion than fact. Although this issue is not terribly relevant to the overall story, nevertheless I feel obliged to address this concern. My realisation that my understanding of *macroevolution* was incomplete has been highlighted by reading around the topic, and in particular the books by Denis Alexander [1] and Francis Collins [2] (the latter author distinguishing himself as the Head of the Human Genome Project). The more I read about this the more I’m blown away by the complexity and beauty of the biochemistry of life. Once upon a time, the Psalmist used to see the glory of God in the sky, but now we truly see Him within ourselves. The other revelation for me was the realisation that the ‘fossil record’ is not just in the ground, but also in our own DNA, and this is telling us that macroevolution does indeed occur – for example, according to Francis Collins, mice and men share a common ancestor! The evidence for evolution is overwhelming, and Christians must not be fearful in taking on board the notion that it may be God’s chosen mechanism for creating all the beauty and diversity of the natural world that we see around us. Recently a Youth Worker friend mentioned a young lass who was doing her science-based A-level course, who enquired whether, as a Christian, she was “allowed to believe in evolution?”. The answer is obviously yes. As Christians we must embrace what the latest science is telling us – science is afterall simply God’s revelation in nature, and nothing science, or scientists, can do can threaten our awesome God in that role as Creator.

Another brilliant little book that I have come across is ‘Just Six Numbers’ but Martin Rees [3]. Although, Martin writes from a secular perspective, the conclusion of the book echoed my own thoughts on fine-tuning, which was very encouraging when I first came across it in 2006. Although Martin goes for the multiverse [4] solution, rather than the ‘God option’, nevertheless all the arguments are there and discussed in a very lucid and concise manner. I suppose the only reasons I disregarded the multiverse option are its total lack of philosophical economy, along with the fact that in physical terms it is pure speculation.

Finally, I’m pleased to mention the Alpha Course in my testimony, as I feel that this has come in for some bad press in recent times. I guess any particular course is only as good as those who run it, and maybe some *are* poor, highly-pressured events. However, I’m pleased to say that the one I attended, run by St John’s Church, Rownhams, Southampton, was a very open, relaxed and informative affair, with no pressure applied to delegates, one way or another. Afterall, it is my own experience that people are convinced not by endless academic discussion of the issues, but rather

by the simple means of personal experience of God's transforming power in their own lives.

**References:**

- [1] Denis Alexander, 2008. *Creation or Evolution: do we have to choose?*, Monarch Books, Oxford. ISBN: 978-1-85424-746-9.
- [2] Francis Collins, 2007. *The Language of God*, Pocket Books, London. ISBN-13: 978-1-84739-092-9
- [3] Martin Rees, 1999. *Just Six Numbers*, Orion Books, London. ISBN: 0-75381-022-0
- [4] David Couchman, 2010. *What's wrong with a multiverse?* Online at: <http://www.focus.org.uk/multiverse.pdf>

## **A journey along a pathway**

A Testimony by Graham Swinerd

**Introduction.**

Well, it is now mid-June 2002, and I have been an agnostic for 51 years, and a Christian for 8 months! And I am thinking – how did this come about? Who is responsible?! I have been intending to write ‘my story’ about my journey along the pathway of Christianity for many months now, and have always made excuses – not enough time, too busy, and so on. All the usual reasons for someone caught up in the business of doing a job, and supporting a family, in the ‘noisy’ twenty first century.

However I have decided to stop for a moment, attempt to quieten the background noise, and try to put on paper (and do justice to) the story of why I decided to begin the journey down the pathway, and what the journey has been like so far. And to contemplate the very long pathway ahead – in other words, I feel very much like a ‘new boy’ with so much to learn about Christianity, and developing a personal relationship with a loving God. However, I am not quite sure why I am writing this. Perhaps it is to capture something important for myself. Perhaps because of the encouragement from others to do so – I guess it may be of interest, and possibly help to sceptical and Christian readers alike.

**Background.**

**Religion** Motives aside, a bit of personal background may be helpful. I was brought up, like a lot of people, in a ‘Christian country’ but not in a Christian family. What I mean by this is that my loving family had no explicit faith in a God, and were not regular worshippers at a church, or otherwise. However, like a lot of kids I did go to church occasionally, and I was taught RE (religious education) in school – all Christian-based when I went to school, unlike today. Consequently I must have heard all the usual Christian ‘stories’ of the nativity, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and so on, many, many times throughout my life. It now seems amazing to me that,

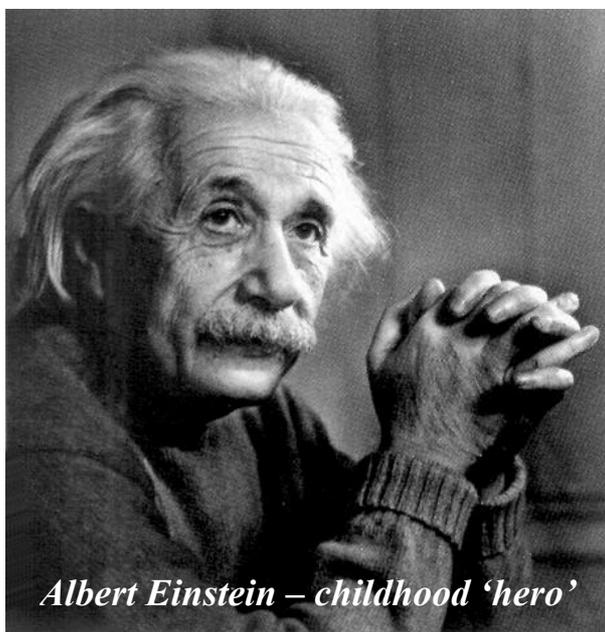
despite this, I had no appreciation or understanding of the profound meaning of these events that took place in a land far away in both space and time.

**Science** Another facet of the young Swinerd was a deep interest in all things scientific, and in particular the sciences of astronomy and astrophysics. I am told that this was kindled by my first primary school teacher, called Mrs Christian. From my perspective as a very young boy, I remember her as a rather kind-hearted old lady. She planted the first seeds of interest in astronomy, which was underlined by a school trip to the London Planetarium.



I remember at that time not knowing what a planetarium was, but once I had been there and seen ‘the show’ I was hooked for life. I have spent most of my life subsequently looking up into the sky at the beautiful manifestations of God’s universe. I suppose I have a rather unusual perspective on life here on planet Earth – most people share a geocentric view that the only things of note that happen in the universe occur here on Earth, whereas in reality the arena of human affairs

is a very small two-dimensional surface, containing a rather small planet in what is an unimaginably large universe. And to quote Douglas Adams, ‘the universe is big’. Current scientific estimates suggest it is 15 billion light years ‘across’. To get an idea of what this means, if we suppose the universe was represented by a globe the size of the Earth, then on this scale our planet would be about 1/100 the size of an atom! I think *that* puts the affairs of man into perspective.



This interest in science was a powerful driver in terms of educational development and career ambitions. Most adolescents have sporting heroes, like football players, but believe it or not the hero of the rather strange young Swinerd was Albert Einstein! To me the intellectual achievement of this great physicist was massive, and my teenage years were spent attempting to accumulate sufficient mathematical skills in order to be able to ‘just understand’ what Einstein had told us about the universe.

**Spirituality** Another characteristic of mine over my lifetime has been a deficit of ‘spirituality’ – I have always felt that I have been the least spiritual person in the history of the universe! It seemed that nothing ever happened to me that could not be accounted for by the laws of the physical world. Perhaps this characteristic was

reinforced by the dominant ‘scientific outlook’ on life. This characteristic was not just confined to spiritual things, but other aspects of life as well. For example, as someone who spent a lot of time looking up into the night (and daytime) sky, I never saw anything unusual like, say, a flying saucer! Everybody else it seemed did, and they wrote loads of books about their experiences, which at one stage in my early life I spent a lot of time reading about. However, much as I wanted to see the ‘unexplained’, all I ever saw were things that could be accounted for by natural phenomena. Perhaps this parallels my ‘religious experience’ as a young person.

It is fair to say, however, that religion has ‘touched me’ superficially in some respects throughout my life. I have always loved art inspired by Christianity, in particular architecture and music. I have always been awed by huge cathedrals – Salisbury, St Paul’s, Bayeux, St Peter’s, and so on – and wondered at the power of the religious inspiration that created such magnificent structures. That same power has inspired some of the World’s most beautiful music as well - for example Vaughan William’s G minor Mass, and the Requiem Mass of Mozart (the *Lacrimosa* of which is perhaps one of the most beautiful and emotional pieces of music ever written).

This little bit of background by no means paints a complete picture, but it does give some insights into some of the characteristics that have shaped my life over the years. And those that I have chosen to reveal are, I think, relevant to the understanding of what has happened to me since the autumn of 2001.

The remaining major influence on my life over the last few years was the death of my father in September 1995. Poor Dad’s death in St Thomas Hospital London, from a failed heart bypass operation, was a great shock. At the time I was *convinced* the operation would be a success, and that it would give him a new lease of life. This made it all the more shocking – the event itself and the aftermath were painful for everyone who loved him. Personally I found the situation traumatic, and very hard to deal with, from the perspective of a person without faith. The reader might infer from this that this event led to a change in my philosophy of life, with an active search for the ‘meaning of life’, perhaps a belief in a God. In fact, this was not the case at all. My life continued along its ‘normal track’, deeply entrenched in the agnostic view of a universe where God’s existence, or otherwise, was not at all relevant to the things that were happening to me (or indeed anyone else). However, I do believe that the events of September 1995 were a subconscious awakening in me of a desire to find answers to fundamental questions about life. This turned out to be not a burning desire however, and it remained latent in me until the year 2001, when some extraordinary things began to happen.

### **The first step.**

**Guernsey** The first step on the pathway was taken in the unlikely setting of a family holiday in Guernsey. The holiday was a late booking, and it was pretty arbitrary where we would spend our holiday, given that most other holiday accommodation in Europe was already taken when we got round to booking. As it happened, we spent a very pleasant week in August 2001, in a hotel in Guernsey.

The weather was reasonable, and I seemed to spend quite a lot of time reading, while sitting by the hotel swimming pool in the sun. Holidays for me are a great time to

read for pleasure – during the rest of the year I seem to spend so much time reading at work, that regretfully I tend to do other things in leisure time. So this was an opportunity to find a large interesting book to ‘plough through’. This time I had found a large biography of Einstein, the author of which I cannot recall. It was well-written, and I enjoyed the account of the young Einstein as he developed his early ground-breaking theories of relativity and gravitation. As the book developed, and as Einstein grew older, the focus moved from physics to politics (pacifism, Zionism, etc.) and my attention wandered, and finally I have to admit I did not stay the course to the end.

**Revelation** However, as I read the book I had some startling insights (for me anyway) about the nature of the universe. These were captured by the simple observation that *‘the universe is defined by our existence within it’*.

To relate what I mean by this is quite difficult to explain, but I will have a go, and hopefully the reader will come along for the ride. Most people are fairly familiar with Darwin’s evolution, and the way that the power of natural selection of species ensures that living organisms are well adapted to their environment. The whole idea is that a particular species will change gradually over time due to mutations (amendments) in the genetic code that defines that species. If the mutations are beneficial – in other words, give the organism an advantage in terms of survival in its natural environment – then it will tend to survive (be ‘naturally selected’) while the original, now relatively disadvantaged organism will tend to die out. We can see this principle in operation about us in the natural world. Darwin himself first devised the principle (if I recall correctly) by observing small variations in a species of finches caused by differences in their living environment. Another more topical example perhaps is the disturbing emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Although this principle of ‘micro-evolution’ is observed to take place in the natural world, science has adopted it as a mechanism – ‘macro-evolution’ - for creating complex organisms, like people, from prebiotic chemicals in the proverbial primeval soup. Having read around this quite a bit, I now believe the chances of creating people in this way are mathematically so small as to make it impossible (however, see the recently written preface), even given the billions of years of time that science estimates as the age of our planet. However, I digress!

**A universe fine tuned for life** To get back to the point, the evolutionist would argue that the diverse species of living creatures, including man, were particularly well suited to the natural environment on this planet because of the action of natural selection over long periods of time. On the other hand, the creationist would claim that life on Earth is well suited to its environment because it was created to be so, by design, by the divine action of God. Without giving it much thought, my own standpoint throughout the majority of my life was that of the evolutionist.

However, my thought by the side of the swimming pool in Guernsey took the argument to a new level that had not occurred to me before. This is along the lines of – *the universe is fundamentally well suited to the existence of us*. If the laws of physics were modified slightly, the complex chemical and physical organisms we call people would not be able to exist.

For example, it can be shown that if the law governing the gravitational force (Newton's famous 'inverse square law') is modified just a tiny bit, then the orbits of things around other things would no longer be stable – I learnt this as an undergraduate student, but of course never thought about the philosophical implications. If this 'law of gravitation' was not as it is, then the moon would not be able to orbit the Earth, the Earth would not be able to orbit the Sun, the Sun would not be able to orbit around our own galaxy, and so on. There would be no stable astronomical structures. Things would crash into other things, and the Earth would not enjoy the stable equilibrium which it currently does. If this were the case, life clearly would not exist anywhere in the universe. Similarly, if the other forces of nature (to do with electromagnetism, and the interactions between the sub-atomic particles) were a bit stronger or a bit weaker, or the masses of these particles which comprise us were a little more or a little less, then complex chemical and biological structures would not be stable, and again the existence of life would be compromised. I am skimming over the technical detail here, in order not to cloud understanding of the fundamental issue. This is - *that the laws which govern the immense universe are in some way fine tuned in order that life can exist in this tiny corner which we call Earth!* The next and most obvious question is - why should this be so?

Of course there may be life elsewhere - all over the universe. If there isn't, then (to quote Carl Sagan through his fictional character Ellie Arroway in 'Contact') 'its an awful waste of space' – but this is a digression which I will not wander down just at the moment.

**The options** To account for why the laws of nature appear to be fine-tuned to the existence of us, I needed some hypotheses to account for this. Sitting by the swimming pool, the ones I could come up with were:

1. One day in the future, the physicists will come up with a 'theory of everything', in which all the parameters which define the laws of nature will be uniquely determinable – and when this occurs these parameters will 'just happen' to take on the required values to allow life to exist.
2. That there are in fact an infinite number of universes, all coexisting along side each other in some 'multidimensional space', each universe having slightly differing physical laws. This idea of multiple universes, called the multiverse option, might seem exotic, but it is one that is entertained by modern physicists. We, of course, exist in this one because it happens to be the one that can sustain the existence of life.
3. That the universe was designed by a Creator in such a way it would be well-suited to the existence of life.

Hypothesis No. 1 seemed as unlikely as the idea that the Earth was the centre of the universe. At present the physicist's quest for the ultimate theory of everything still seems a long way away, and there appears to be a certain arbitrariness in current attempts to establish the values of the fundamental parameters that define these 'models' of the universe. Hypothesis No. 2 did have at least a 'scientifically respectable' explanation for why we inhabit a universe fine tuned to our existence. However, given a choice between No. 2 and No. 3, I have to say that the use of Occam's razor seemed appropriate. This is a device, which I first came across when doing my graduate studies in the 1970s, often used in science to establish the most

likely theory to account for a set of observations. It is along the lines of ‘all other things being equal, the simplest explanation is probably the correct one’. Option No. 2 seemed much more complicated than No. 3, so on this basis I went for No. 3. The massive consequence of all this is that I had convinced myself that there was a Creator God responsible for all we see around us!

**Belief** The way I have written the above summary about my thought processes suggests that it was very ‘matter of fact’ and straightforward to arrive at this conclusion. In fact it took a long time beyond my August stay in Guernsey. I remember finally arriving at the above conclusion during September 2001, just prior to the St. John’s church Alpha Course. Generally, it was an intellectual struggle, and given my background the conclusion was very difficult to come to terms with. The other thing to note is that this ‘thought process’ certainly does not constitute a ‘proof’ that God exists. If this were possible, then clearly we would not need faith, and without faith God cannot exist – a kind of absurd, circular argument, which I think I read in ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’!

Ultimately, I am now very comfortable with this astonishing belief in a Creator. There are many facets of ‘macro-evolution’ with which I have been uncomfortable for a while, particularly those to do with the staggering complexity of the physics and chemistry of life – even a single cell is more complex than our most sophisticated computers. I have no real expertise in this area, but reading what ‘the experts’ have said, the probability that life evolved from life-less chemicals over time is so vanishingly small as to be zero (as I have said earlier). And this is not a new conclusion – scientists like the late Fred Hoyle arrived at this one decades ago. But still no one is listening (however – see preface again).

I have always been brought up (through my formal education) with the idea that the work of the scientist is to uncover the laws of physics, chemistry, etc., but if you think about it, it is not at all obvious philosophically that the universe should be governed by laws at all. This is something that is taken for granted – a kind of axiom – by the scientific community. If it were otherwise, then all the scientists would be out of a job! Put another way, why should it be that the universe can be understood in terms of theories and mathematics devised by the human mind? Put simply, my new-found belief in a Creator also leads to a better understanding of why the universe is governed by laws. A nice aspect of this is a changed perspective of scientists, who can now be thought of as devoting their careers to uncovering the ‘laws of nature’ that were originally ‘written’ by the Creator.

At this stage, in September 2001, all I knew was that I now believed in a Creator God. I didn’t know who he or she was, or whether they loved me, or were indifferent to my existence. After this ‘first step on the pathway’, the next steps were taken in the Alpha Course run by Julian Williams, vicar of St. John’s church, Rownhams, near Southampton, in the autumn of 2001. The juxtaposition of this course with the revelation of my new belief in a Creator would appear to be a coincidence. However, having heard the views of a number of Christians since, with God there appears to be no such thing as ‘coincidence’...

## **A digression – some thoughts on the chronology of the Creation**

The inevitable result of all this thinking about the universe, its creation, and God (apart from giving you a headache!) is the accumulation of insights into some of the issues where religion and science meet. I now no longer see this boundary as a place where there is conflict. I am now in thorough agreement with Albert Einstein – I can't remember his exact quote but it was along the lines that 'religion without science is lame, and science without religion is blind' (however, one should bear in mind that Einstein's religion was more pantheistic, than theistic!) My scientific view of the Creation – the universe and the biodiversity here on Earth – is now no longer a barrier to belief but a necessary and integral part of it.

One of the above-mentioned issues where science and religion clearly meet, and perhaps have a different view, is the creation of 'heaven and earth'. The biblical account of the first day of creation is given beautifully in the first 5 verses of the book of Genesis -

**<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. <sup>2</sup>And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.**

Many Christians choose to accept the biblical account literally – i.e. that God did it all in one 24 hour 'solar day' period – and others choose to interpret 'the day' as a period of time of unspecified duration. I have read a number of interesting accounts recently by members of the former group (all scientists) who believe in a literal 6 day creation, courtesy of a book lent to me by a friend (*In Six Days*, J.F. Ashton – Editor, Published by New Holland, 2000). The 6-day creationists seem to favour a young universe and a young Earth – of the order of 10 thousand years old – while the scientific community claim that the geological age of the Earth is immense, perhaps of the order of 5 billion years (that's 5 with 9 zeros). In such accounts, many authors make an observation along the lines of 'it is after all not possible to look back in time' to see what actually happened.

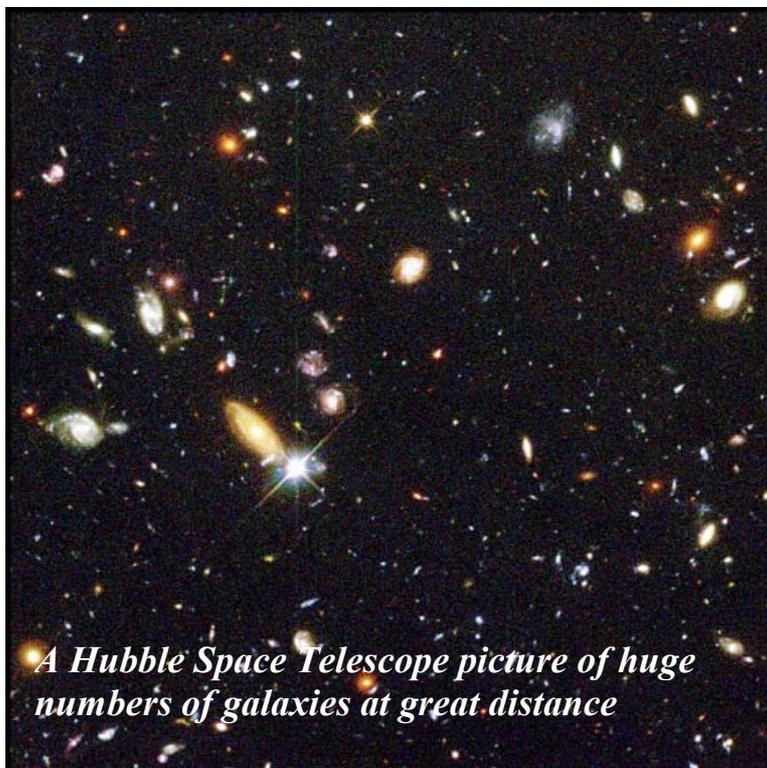
However, it is very easy to 'look back in time'. All you have to do is look up. When you see the moon, you are seeing it as it was about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  seconds ago, because this is how long the light has taken to get to you. Similarly, when you 'look' at the Sun (not directly I hope, as it's bad for your eyes), you are seeing it as it was about 8 minutes ago. And if you look at the next most distant star, in the constellation of the Centaur, you are looking back 4 years. This is why we say that this star is '4 light years away' – the light year is a commonly used unit of distance in astronomy, being the distance light travels in a period of 1 year moving at a staggering speed of 300 000 kilometres per second (or 186 000 miles per second, if you prefer). As you can imagine this is a very large distance – about  $9 \times 10^{12}$  kilometres (that's 9 with 12 zeros) or about  $6 \times 10^{12}$  miles (that's 6 with 12 zeros)! Anyway, getting back to the point, you might ask – what has this to do with the 1-day creation?



*A spiral galaxy – just like our own Milky Way*

Well the biblical account suggests that ‘heaven and the earth’ were both created within that first day of creation. And if we interpret this literally and the Earth is young – say 10,000 years old – then presumably the universe is too. So if the universe is only 10 000 years old, then we would not expect to see more than 10 000 light years away, or observe astronomical structures more than 10 000 light

years across when we look up into the sky, and into the past. Clearly, when we look into the sky we *do* see structures larger than this – for example, our home galaxy the Milky Way can be shown to be of the order of 100 000 light years across using very ‘simple’ and unambiguous methods. So the light from the stars on the other side of the galaxy started its journey 100 000 years ago in order that we can see them now. So clearly these stars, and therefore the universe, had to exist at least 100 000 years ago.



*A Hubble Space Telescope picture of huge numbers of galaxies at great distance*

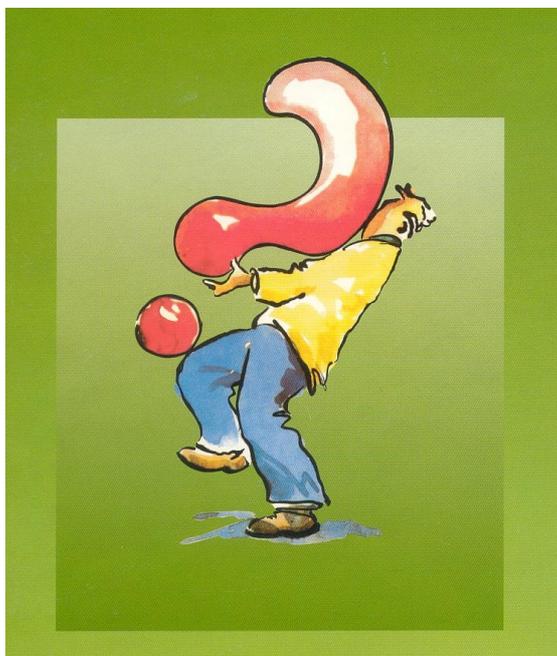
Similarly, the nearest galaxy to our own, the Andromeda Galaxy can be shown to be of the order of millions of light years distant. And, using observatories like the orbiting Hubble Space Telescope, we can see galaxies of the order of billions of light years away – the only assumption we are making when we estimate these distances is that the distant galaxies are of similar size to our own. So looking out into the universe, and therefore

looking back in time, we see a very long universal history. Of course, you could argue that since God has the power to do anything, He could have ‘orchestrated’ an electromagnetic field (i.e. the light received here on Earth) to give us the illusion that the Milky Way is 100 000 light years across. OK, this is possible, but I don’t believe

that He is in any way malicious or obtuse. This evidence, I believe, leads to the simple conclusion that ‘heaven and the earth’ both have a rather long history (perhaps billions of years), and that, at least, the first biblical day should be not be interpreted literally.

### **More tentative steps**

**Alpha Course** Now back to my ‘story’, and we pick it up again in the Autumn of 2001, and the Alpha Course hosted at a local school. When I heard the course was running I was very comfortable with the idea of going, since I have known, and developed warm friendships with many of the people at St. John’s church over a long period of time. Also with my embryonic belief in a Creator God fresh in my mind, I was very keen to hear what Christianity could add to my understanding. As the reader might suspect from what has gone before, at this stage my belief was a very rational, rather than spiritual thing. I tend to over-intellectualise everything, and my mind was full of questions about how my Creator God could be set within the context of Christianity.



If you haven’t been to an Alpha Course, I can certainly recommend it. The format is very comfortable – the evening starts with a soft drink and a chat as people arrive, followed by a full meal. Then, a talk is given by Julian on the evening’s topic, and this is followed by a period when the issues can be discussed in groups, and questions asked. I found the atmosphere always convivial and constructive, and I have to thank the people on my table for their patience in tolerating my inquisitive approach to everything.

**Discussion Group** I was blessed with a lovely group on my table, who made the whole experience comfortable and stimulating. There was Marina, Pam and Dawn, who are all committed Christians. The group was led jointly, and very ably, by Marion and Andy. Marion I knew before – in the Spring of 2001 I did a paint-job on her garage and porch! Andy had only recently moved to Southampton, so I didn’t know him prior to the course, but subsequently he has become a good friend. Finally, there was Jennie, a friend of Marina’s who had come out of curiosity, and who was ‘behind even me’ on the pathway. At the outset, Jennie and I shared a certain empathy, healthy scepticism, and desire to learn more about the Christian God. In a way it was comforting to have another person there who was not immersed in Christian faith, and who could identify with my deficit in spirituality and faith.

I attended each week, with the ‘topic’ on each evening shaped by the Alpha course ‘manual’. Some of these were ‘factual’ – for example, ‘who is Jesus?’ covered the historical evidence for Jesus’s existence and why he had such an impact on the

subsequent 2000 years of human history. Others, although interesting, I thought related to the people there who were already committed Christians – for example, ‘how can I be sure of my faith?’ and ‘how does God guide us?’. During the early days of the course, I felt that perhaps it should be called the ‘Omega Course’, and someone else should do a real ‘Alpha Course’ for people like me with no Christian faith!

As the weeks passed by, I really looked forward to the Alpha Course sessions on Wednesday evening. The talks given by Julian were always stimulating, and the discussion group sessions afterwards always seemed to end too early, just as the group was warming up. During the early weeks, prior to the away-day, I seemed to have so many questions about Christian faith, as if on a quest to understand in order to believe. In retrospect, I feel that I should apologise to other group members if I in any way ‘monopolised’ the discussion time. I know that my tendency to intellectualise everything was the source of exasperation for some group members, and I remember one instance when Pam, with the best of intentions, ‘called in the vicar’ to mediate on a particular point of discussion! However, this is the joy of the course, when people with very different views can meet, and discuss (and have respect for) each others points of view.

**The Crucifixion** On the third evening of the course, the ‘topic’ was ‘why did Jesus die?’ and crucially I missed this one due to a business trip abroad. Although someone made a recording of the talk for me, to which I listened in the following week, clearly it didn’t make much of an impact. If I look through my Alpha Course manual now, I find the same question scribbled in several places in the notes margin over the first six weeks or so – ‘what is Jesus’s death all about?’. Clearly I must have returned to this pivotal question several times in the discussion groups over this time. I can still remember finding the issue a difficult one to understand – and in retrospect I do not know why. Finally the light dawned, but not until well into November when in the margin was written a simple note – ‘on the cross Satan was defeated!’. It is when thinking on these things, that I feel so much indebted to all the people on my table for being so patient in bringing me sufficiently along the path prior to the Alpha Course away-day, which proved pivotal in my story.

**Away-Day** On a Saturday around mid-November 2001, the Alpha Course away-day took place at the Atherley School in Nursling. A morning and an afternoon session were held in the beautiful old house at Atherley, on the ‘topic’ of the Holy Spirit. At the time, I was feeling particularly low, having had a rare bout of flu which had left me with a nasty chest infection. The doctor had diagnosed it as a viral infection, and had therefore decided not to prescribe antibiotics – so it was a case of go away and cough a lot! In an attempt to airiate the lungs, I had decided to ride around on my bike to try to rid myself of the awful cough.

So on the morning of the away-day I arrived rather wearily at Atherley on my bicycle. The morning session ‘who is the Holy Spirit?’ took the usual format of a talk followed by a discussion group, and this was followed by lunch. During the day, there was something that Julian said which was to have a major impact on my future development as a Christian. I can’t remember in which session it was said, but it was a quote by St. Augustine – which was simply along the lines of ‘I believe in order that I might understand’. This immediately struck me as exactly the reverse of the

approach to Christianity that I had been taking up to this point. I had been attempting to understand ‘everything’ first, and then believe! St Augustine’s simple quote was urging me to do something that was alien to me – to take leap beyond the security of reason. For some reason, at that moment, I was ready to accept this and take a step of faith to see where it would lead.

The day was full of surprises for me, and the next ‘turning point’ occurred in the afternoon session of the away-day. If you haven’t been on an Alpha Course, and are invited, then watch out for this session! It doesn’t take the usual format, but is in fact a practical session in which the question is asked ‘how can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?’

**The Holy Spirit** If I recall correctly, all of the course participants were assembled in a large upper room of the old Atherley House, and the session was introduced and led by Julian. Without going into all the details, the main focus of the gathering was to invite the Holy Spirit to ‘fill’ those present, as we sat quietly in ‘receptive mood’. Since initially I was expecting the usual meeting format, what came next was not only a surprise, but it was also to change my life! In the still atmosphere of the gathering, it was clear that ‘things’ were beginning to happen. As Julian continued to make the invitation to the Spirit, while encouraging us to be receptive, the first indication of His presence manifested itself in a friend. John began to behave rather ‘strangely’, which at first I found a little alarming until I realised he was also very happy! Then, as I sat quietly, eyes closed, it soon became clear that the Spirit was inviting *me* to participate actively in the session! It is very difficult for me to find the words to describe the spiritual event that took place that afternoon. It is even more difficult given that nothing like it has ever happened to me before – something was happening that I didn’t understand, and as such I was fearful of it. In fact I was so fearful that I did not accept what was being offered. Although I can understand this instinctive reaction, I think I still regret not surrendering myself at that moment. However, regret was not my overriding emotion that afternoon. Instead I had learnt a powerful lesson that there is more to life than just the bits described by the physicists!

All this sounds like a bit of a ‘road to Damascus’ experience, but on the day my reaction to it was quite reserved – I suppose I would consider myself to be a rather emotionally reserved person. But it did leave its mark, and, along with St Augustine’s philosophy, it opened my eyes to a spiritual dimension to life through Jesus Christ.

As I left Atherley at the end of the day, I was particularly touched by a friend Glennis, who gave me a big hug, and said how happy she was to see me there on that day. And as I came back down to Earth, riding off into the cold, dark afternoon on my bike, so was I!

### **A new life**

Since that memorable day at Atherley, I have continued my journey along the pathway of Christianity, growing more and more in understanding and faith.

As we approached Christmas of 2001, the Alpha Course came to its inevitable end. Many people on the course, including myself, had benefited greatly from attendance, and now were to miss our regular Wednesday evening Christian fellowship. This 'hole' was to be filled, however, by the running of the 'ABC course' at the vicarage from January 2002. This was run by Julian, and for me started out as a 'considering Confirmation' course, and ended as a preparation for Baptism and Confirmation, which will take place – God willing – at St John's church on 17 November 2002 – coincidentally exactly the first anniversary of the Alpha away-day! The ABC group of about a dozen people are a lovely bunch, who I have got to know well through our regular Monday evening gatherings. In May 2002, six of these – Bernie, John, Julie, Mary, Phyllis and Sue – were confirmed at Highfield church, Southampton, which was a very joyful and spiritual occasion for all who attended.

### **Just the beginning**

In such a small space of time, a great deal has happened to me, but I still see myself as a 'new boy' in terms of Christian development, with the pathway stretching miles ahead into the future. I've still got a lot to learn about prayer, about understanding God's word through reading the Bible, about developing a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, but then haven't we all? I am grateful to so many people for bringing me to this point in my life – my family, Julian Williams, all those with whom I have shared Christian fellowship over the last few months, and of course Jesus for 'finding me'.

Well, that's about it, so far. Apart from to say that I think 'my story' is a good example of God meeting people wherever they happen to be in their lives. Mine seemed to have no room for God, and was surrounded by an apparently impregnable, and long-standing, wall of agnosticism. The process by which He reached me, which I have tried to convey in these pages, is pretty extraordinary!

It has taken me rather a long time to write all this, and it is now mid-July 2002. Next week I'm off to Cornwall on a family holiday again, but I don't think it will be quite the same as Guernsey last year!

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