

Bishop Joseph Butler's Place in the English Tradition

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"I am persuaded," wrote Bacon in 1605, "that if the choice and best of those observations upon texts of Scriptures, which have been made dispersedly in Sermons within your Majesty's island of Britain by the space of these forty years or more ... had been set down in a continuance, it had been the best work in divinity which had been written since the Apostles' times."¹ The best-selling publications of Shakespeare's day, to judge by printing-house lists, were volumes of sermons, not volumes of verse. And the process continued for another fifty years after Bacon wrote. The English Civil War, at least in England itself, was a war where every blow was emphasized by a hundred words of explanation from pulpit and press, and Milton's prose and verse echoes this rhetoric. The staff conferences of Cromwell's army, some of them beautifully edited by Toronto's Woodhouse, read to us remarkably like sermons, clerical convocations and scholastic disputations. Few of the sermons which in this manner shaped modern English are read today, and those which are, like Donne's, excite much more than they convince. But I am persuaded that this homiletic literature of England has immense importance in the history of Christianity.

It is so easy to write too political a history of the Church of England. The hand of the State was heavy indeed. "If any publick Reader in either of Our Universities, or any Head or Master of a College, or any other person respectively in either of them, shall affix any sense to any Article, or shall publickly read, determine, or hold any publick Disputation, or suffer any such to be held either way, in either the Universities or Colleges respectively; or if any Divine in the Universities shall preach or print any thing either way, other than is already established in Convocation with Our Royal Assent; he, or they the offenders, shall be liable to Our displeasure, and the Church's censure in Our Commission Ecclesiastical, as well as any other: and We will see there shall be due Execution upon them." So Charles II in 1662 reaffirmed the Articles agreed upon at London exactly a hundred years earlier, "for the avoiding of diversities of opinions and for the establishing of consent touching true religion."² This strong act cost the Church of England two thousand clergy during 1662, and hundreds more left under the same pressure in 1689.

¹ *The Advancement of Learning*, Everyman edition pp. 218-9.

² Still prefaced to the Articles in the Book of Common Prayer.

But the dominance of the pulpit in England in the century between Thomas and Oliver Cromwell meant that when, after 1689, this Anglican settlement prevailed by the use of police, it inherited Europe's most richly theologized vernacular. The Christian tradition had been made over piecemeal into English, and because of the influence of the Galileo and Simon condemnation on Continental theology, and also of the Holy See's failure to determine the *de auxiliis* dispute. English rather than any other became the first European vernacular in which a scientific theology might come of age in close touch with the new sciences – physics, mathematics, economics and history, geology and biology and so on.

Methodist polemic focussed on the worldliness of the Anglican clergy, and literary satire found it an easy target, and the Victorian rationalists, struggling against the Anglican Establishment in the universities, endorsed these distortions because they suited their case. We must not let such facile history obstruct our view of the ecclesial community graced by such tremendous figures as Handel and Butler and Wesley and Johnson and Burke. The best single study of its intellectual vigour is probably Newman's novel, *Loss and Gain*. Reding, its central figure, would not recommend the usual works of controversy with Rome, for which the Anglican Church was famous; rather those which are of a positive character, and displayed the peculiar principles of that Church; Hooker's great work, for instance or Bull's *Defensio* and *Harmonia*, or Pearson's *Vindiciae*, or Jackson on the Creed, a noble work; to which Laud on Tradition might be added ... Such, too, were Bingham's *Antiquities*, Waterland on the Use of Antiquity, Wall on Infant Baptism, and Palmer on the Liturgy. Nor ought he to neglect practical and devotional authors, as Bishops Taylor, Wilson and Horne.³

This list of Newman's, far from being exhaustive, as a glance at the Library of Anglo-Catholic theology brings home to us, ignores the very names a modern student of English literature first encounters, Donne and Andrewes, Herbert, Brunet and Tillotson, William Law. And the historian of ideas must note that Paley, whom triumphant Darwinians like to treat as a representative figure, is passed over altogether. But above all we must round out the picture, as Newman does, by appreciating that these leading Anglican authors constituted an entire cultural milieu. The eighteenth was the century that learned the bookshelf habit, and it was learned principally in the country parsonage (England having then but one large city). From the 1680s into the 1860s the parsonage provided an educated reading public, of both sexes, setting the standards of scholarship, morality and taste.

In the period named, most of the major English writers wrote for the parsonage, whether they said so or not; many wrote about it and a solid majority came from it. Think, in imaginative literature, of Swift and Addison, Goldsmith and Sterne, Cowper and Crabbe, Coleridge and Leigh Hunt, the

³ *Loss and Gain*, p. 190 in the Universe paperback edition.

Brontes and Kingsley and Lewis Carroll, Arnold and Tennyson. In philosophy, though this was the name adopted by the very men warring on theology, there were Berkeley and Butler and Reid, in painting, despite Protestant iconoclasm, Reynolds; in science, *mirabile dictu*, most of the immortals, not only Newton and Wren and Hooke and Gilbert White, but also, if we stretch the term slightly, Priestly, and even Darwin, who trained for Orders. In exact humane scholarship Bentley was followed by a great host of lesser names, the poet Wordsworth's brother eminent among them, and the wife of Austin the legal theorist. Here, too, thanks to Samuel Wesley and Mendelssohn, Bach found a second home. Even at the end of Victoria's reign, when the parsonage had lost its ascendancy to Mill and Arnold and Spencer, it remained potent through names like Cecil Rhodes and Lord Lugard, Alfred North Whitehead and Rupert Brooke and Somerset Maugham (who was brought up in one), 'Golden Bough' Frazer and Lillie Langtry.

Along with the cultural role of the parsonage, and presupposing it, went an extremely vigorous lay apostolate which like the parsonage escapes the notice of historians because of the tendency, fatal to genuine historical analysis, to imagine that what has happened had to happen. Boyle, whose lecture foundation survives no less than his law about gases, was an early example, as, for that matter, were many of the great Elizabethans, figures as diverse as Raleigh, Chapman and Massinger. But as something self-aware, deliberate and continuous, this undertaking begins with Dryden: Doctor Johnson, Edmund Burke, Coleridge, Malthus, Gladstone, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis. A case such as Johnson's, his early correspondence with Berkeley, the profound influence of William Law on his whole approach to literature and to the problem of faith and reason, and in late life close friendship with Burke, shows the close texture of this tradition. The sermon as an art from decayed during the eighteenth century. "The great object of modern sermons is to hazard nothing; their characteristic is, decent debility," wrote Sidney Smith, another star in this firmament, very justly.⁴ But Dryden, Johnson and the rest set out to see that what took its place was nothing less than English literature itself. The powerful Christian current in this literature has nothing inevitable about it; it is not a residue or a happy accident; it is an apostolate by men of prayer and acute thinkers, a deliberate collective labour.

How close this tradition always was to the mind of Papal Rome was always evident in the procession of converts, from Crashaw and Dryden to Edith Sitwell and Walton Hannah, not omitting such notable abortions as Marvell and Gibbon. Popery has been alleged against all the major figures, such as Laud, Butler and Doctor Johnson, and indeed even William Shakespeare. Newman, who crowns this tradition both from a literary and from a theological standpoint, and who will be gravely misunderstood by anyone who takes him out of its context, has Reding say:

⁴ In his review of Rennel's *Discourses in Essays Social and Political*, p. 257 of my undated edition (c. 1846).

You bade me read the Anglican divines; I have given a great deal of time to them, and I am embracing that creed which alone is the scope to which they converge in their separate teaching; the creed which upholds the divinity of tradition with Laud, consent of Fathers with Beveridge, a visible Church with Bramhall, a tribunal of dogmatic decisions with Bull, the authority of the Pope with Thorndike, penance with Taylor, prayers for the dead with Ussher, celibacy, asceticism and ecclesiastical discipline with Bingham.⁵

Once again, of course, we might greatly lengthen the list, both of men and of doctrines; Anglican authors have finely expounded the doctrines of purgatory and the mass and the Eucharistic presence, mystical prayer, and above all, let us never forget, the literal meaning of the New Testament. But enough has been said to demonstrate the presence in Anglicanism of something far from static and decadent, of a positive development of Christian doctrine in many fields. It did not dominate Anglicanism, or win promotion there; it was not, enforced; rather it was consistently abused and repudiated; our point is simply that it was there. “And thousands,” wrote Newman as an Anglican divine, “who have been born and trained in separation, become, through their faith, divinely enlightened to seek and join that One Holy and Catholic Body, in which God’s presence abides.”⁶ It is imperative to grasp that Newman’s sermons both to the parish and the university, and his treatises on justification and development, are the work of an Anglican. Had he, like his great Danish contemporary, died at the age of forty-two, Catholicism would have much ado proving its right to call him its own.

Now “the greatest name in the Anglican Church,” according to Newman, was Joseph Butler’s. Newman was not alone in this judgment; Anglicans have always thought their communion enjoyed the highest distinction by Butler’s conversion to it and death in it, and only T. S. Eliot rivals him in these respects. “The immortal *Analogy*,” said the eighth *Britannica*, “has probably done more to silence the objections of infidelity than any other ever written from the earliest ‘apologies’ downwards.” Coleridge, Hazlitt tells us, “considered Bishop Butler as a true philosopher, a profound and conscientious thinker, a genuine reader of nature, and his own mind. He did not speak of his *Analogy*, but of his *Sermons at the Rolls Chapel*.”⁷ Gladstone, who devoted the years after retirement from politics to completing a monumental edition of Butler, said that he “may be thought to have attained the climax of his power, in his own country, when, sixty or seventy years back” – in the early nineteenth century, that is to say – “he took his place by the side of Aristotle, among the standard books for the final examinations in the university of

⁵ Newman, Op. cit., p. 207.

⁶ *Faith the Title for Justification*, Sermon XII in vol. vi of *Parochial and Plain Sermons*.

⁷ *My First Acquaintance with Poets*.

Oxford.”⁸ In this role as a standard classic, Butler constantly extorted praise from hostile critics. Mark Pattison, during the reaction which followed Newman’s conversion, was instrumental in eliminating Butler from the Oxford finals, yet he wrote of the Analogy’s “solid structure of logical argument, in which it surpasses every other book that I know of in the English language.”⁹ Leslie Stephen, whose *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* belongs to the school of liberal humanism, decidedly anti-Christian, which has held possession ever since, says there that in Butler, theology “seems to utter an expiring protest against the meanness and the flimsiness of the rival theories, by which men attempted to replace it.”¹⁰ The inner meaning of Anglicanism in Christian history lies here or nowhere.

But when Matthew Arnold, in *Saint Paul and Protestantism*, traced Newman’s lineage through Butler and Hooker, he did less than justice to Butler’s central place in the Anglican tradition, with the emphasis on the word, *central*. Arnold’s essay on Butler, as Gladstone showed, is probably the most arbitrary of all his writings on religion, which is saying a great deal. A “high” man, a Hooker man, Butler became, certainly; but his method and tone, and his personal theological heritage, was that of a “broad” man, a Bacon man, a Tillotson man. His characteristic method of theological analysis, analogy as he called it, is to be found enforced in Bacon, both the thing and the name, as the method proper to divinity. “For after the articles and principles of religion are placed and exempted from examination of reason, it is then permitted unto us to make derivations and inferences from and according to the analogy of them ... this point, well laboured and defined of, would in my judgment be an opiate to stay and bridle not only the vanity of curious speculations, wherewith the schools labour, but the fury of controversies, wherewith the church laboureth.”¹¹ Here, rather than in Hooker and Saint Thomas, was Butler’s effectual charter. The whole point of Butler’s work is that if you genuinely seek for a *reasonable* Christianity you end with a Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.

For Catholics, the most telling praise of Butler is Newman’s. If, as seems the case, Catholics desire to set Newman in the highest rank as a Christian thinker they have to allow him to share his authority with Butler. His *University Sermons* and the continuation of their inquiry through the essays on *Development* and the *Grammar of Assent* entirely presuppose what Butler had expounded on the nature of Conscience and its place in the system of human nature, on friendship in relation to the rest of morality and religion, and, of course, on the analogy between the system of nature and the system

⁸ From W. E. Gladstone’s edition of Butler’s Works, vol. III (Subsidiary Studies), p. 130.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 76

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 55.

¹¹ Bacon’s *Advancement* p. 211.

of grace. Butler did this all so well that Newman nowhere felt it necessary, or indeed anything less than presumptuous, to go again over the same ground. He does not repeat it or comment it or qualify it, but takes it as read. “The great philosopher,” he called Butler in his *Essay on Development* – “so often quoted,” as he rightly says thirty pages later.¹² “Such Works as Bishop Butler’s *Analogy*,” he remarked in his *University Sermons*, “carry on the characteristic lineaments of the Gospel into the visible course of things and, as it were, root its doctrines into nature and society.” And the other Christian thinkers Newman commended in this way in this context were none other than Athanasius, Augustine and Aquinas.¹³ Late in life, in his preface to the third edition of the *Via Media*, he described theology as “the fundamental and regulating principle of the whole Church system.” But what was that theology on which Newman was prepared to rest everything, if not what he spoke of in 1830 as “an argument contained by implication, though not formally drawn out, in Bishop Butler’s *Analogy*,”¹⁴ and the process he spoke of again in 1880, fifty years later, as “a use of *Analogy* beside and beyond Butler’s use of it”?¹⁵ It begins to look very perverse, or very ignorant, to think of Newman as some sort of theological alternative to scholasticism or thomism.

Butler’s cultural point of departure was Hobbes, as his footnotes to his sermons tell us. What Montaigne did in France and Cervantes in Spain, Hobbes did, much less impressively of course, in England, expressing the tensions fundamental in the culture – between faith and science, between law and passion. “One of those extraordinary little upstarts,” Eliot calls him, “whom the chaotic motions of the Renaissance tossed into an eminence which they hardly deserved and have never lost.” Long life and extremely varied and lucky opportunities enabled him to provide, in his *Leviathan*, “an ingenious framework on which there was some peg or other to hang every question of philosophy, psychology, government or economics.”¹⁶ There Butler found the questions. But not the answers. He did not find the answers in books at all, and his text does little to remind us of other writers. He found his answers, to use his own favourite words, in conscience and nature.

Butler may be described as *anima naturaliter thomistica*. So, of course, must everybody, if thomism is what it says it is, the philosophy we hold whether we think we do or not. But Butler has a singular power to flush out our real assumptions, hidden and unavoidable. And while doing so he adds

¹² *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, pages 47 and 79 of the Sheed and Ward paperback edition, London 1960.

¹³ Sermon on *Wisdom, as Contrasted with Faith and with Bigotry*, sermon XIV of the *University Sermons*, pars. 19 and 31.

¹⁴ The second University sermon, *The Influence of Natural and Revealed Religion Respectively*, par. 25.

¹⁵ Note II appended to the second edition of the *Grammar of Assent*, p. 386 of the Image paperback edition.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot’s *John Bramhall*, from his *Selected Essays*, London 1932, p. 345.

many masterly precisions not found, as words go, in Aquinas. His sermons on resentment and compassion, for instance, deal with passions scarcely touched on in the *Summa*, those cross-breed or compound passions which arise when love and anger, or love and sadness, mate as mate they must in a fallen world. “As God Almighty foresaw the irregularities and disorders, both natural and moral, which would happen in this state of things; He hath graciously made provision against them, by giving us several passions and affections, which arise from, or whose objects are, those disorders.”¹⁷ Butler, who defended the notion of substance against Locke, was also an impenitent exponent of final causes. Appetites suppose and point to world-order, for they are “toward the external things themselves,” and the passions of pity and indignation suppose and point to the Fall of Man. Such interlocking and mutual reinforcement of the systems of nature and grace was Butler’s main theme. And in the *Analogy* he endorsed an all-important passage from Colliber, one of the very few cases where Butler quotes, except from Scripture:

The faith which the Christian revelation requires in its great Revealer... is what we were antecedently obliged to by the very *law of nature*, on supposition that his real Divinity was discoverable by us. In this case, he that believeth not is condemned already, viz, by the law of nature.¹⁸

This is saying much more than that grace perfect nature. It is saying that it is unnatural to refuse grace and may even be unnatural to be without grace – a line of thought most memorably expanded in Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*.

In Butler, this line of thought is not always carried forward without close metaphysical analysis. Instance the Dissertation on personal identity appended to the *Analogy*. But generally the metaphysics is contained in his idiomatic and characteristic use of the verb *to be*. Thus, whether we silence guilty conscience “by the hurry of business or of pleasure, or by superstition or moral equivocations, this ... makes no alteration at all in the nature of our case. Things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: why then should we desire to be deceived?”¹⁹ Again, “either there is a difference between right and wrong, or there is not; religion is true, or it is not. If it be not, there is no reason for any concern about it: but if it be true, it requires real fairness of mind and honesty of heart.”²⁰ With such passages goes a robust confidence in the human intellect’s power to know things as they are, a power which must not be demonstrated. “for it is ridiculous to attempt to prove the truth of those perceptions, whose truth we

¹⁷ Bernard, J. H. (ed.) *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* by Joseph Butler, London 1913, p. 112.

¹⁸ This all-important quotation is in part two, chapter one, section two of the *Analogy*, p. 127 of the 1906 Everyman edition.

¹⁹ From the *Fifteen Sermons*, sermon VII, par. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sermon X, par. 16.

can no otherwise prove, than by other perceptions of exactly the same kind with them, and which there is the same just ground to suspect; or to attempt to prove the truth of our faculties, which can no otherwise be proved, than by the use or means of those very suspected faculties themselves.”²¹ The thomistic analysis of the explanation of the existence of things, and defence of the truth of knowledge, is nothing but a language designed to fix attention on such permanent dilemmas, which fix the foundations of common-sense thinking. Butler had “Descartes” and “Mr. Locke” in mind, but the same principles and the same method apply in the face of Hume’s pyrronism and Kant’s subjectivism and the various forms of materialistic evolutionism. So that the historian of ideas has two propositions to make of Butler: you cannot have Newman without him; and you cannot have him without thomistic metaphysics.

The study of Butler belongs almost exclusively to the history of ideas. He has no rewards for the researcher into documents. Bartlett’s much padded *Memoirs of the Life, Character and writings of Joseph Butler, D.C.L., Late Lord Bishop of Durham* appeared in 1839. A century or so of subsequent research has brought to light a handful of unpublished remains, edited by Bishop Steere in 1853, and one or two factual precisions; none of it is important; the matter rests where it was when the Dean of Salisbury wrote to Bartlett that “it must ever be a subject of regret that so little is known of the life of the incomparable author of the *Analogy*.”²² Canadian historians have let it rest there, for I found Bartlett in the library of a key Anglican institution uncut. Butler had died in 1752 disposing, as Bishop of Durham, of great wealth, nine thousand three hundred and thirty five pounds eleven shillings and five pence, to be precise, and in doing so he closed the inquiry for all time:

Lastly, it is my positive and express will, that all my sermons, letters and papers, whatever, which are in a deal box, locked, directed to Dr Forster, and now standing in a little room within my library at Hampstead, be burnt without being read by anyone, as soon as may be after my decease. Jo. Duresme.²³

Any life of Butler, as a result, is a brief life. They all read much the same – Gladstone, Spooner, Baker. Bayne’s preface to the 1906 Everyman series *Analogy* was particularly good. Butler was born in 1692, which means that he knew a social and political equilibrium England had not enjoyed since the fourteenth century. The Authorized Version, rather than the pulpit, came to dominate the Christian consciousness in England; “the Bible is our religion, according to the strange phrase, which however has, alas, too true a meaning

²¹ From the *Dissertation of Personal Identity* appended to the *Analogy*.

²² Bartlett, p. 307.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-6.

in fact”²⁴ (I quote Newman). But this influence was offset in Butler’s day by the determination of both the High and the Broad parties to make the Establishment work. T. S. Eliot, who has written most sensitively on Anglican history, catches the spirit of it at its best when he writes that “the writings of Hooker and Andrewes illustrate that determination to stick to essentials, that awareness of the needs of the time, the desire for clarity and precision on matters of importance, and the indifference to matters indifferent”²⁵ which were exactly Butler’s spirit. But exactly why this particular Presbyterian decided, on reaching his majority, to become an Anglican we cannot pretend to know. The decision rested on deep scholarship – at Samuel Jone’s Academy, where he was from 1711 to 1714, he turned two verses of the Hebrew Bible into Greek every morning. He had made it his business, he wrote Clarke about the time of his conversion, “ever since I thought myself capable of such sort of reasoning, to prove to myself the being and attributes of God.” No doubt it was in consequence of this that he found Oxford, 1714-8, “frivolous lectures and unintelligible disputations.”²⁶ But his penetrating correspondence with Clarke concerning the Supreme Being, which belongs to these years, earned him the preachingship of the Rolls Chapel the year of his ordination, 1718. Unrewarding financially, this preachingship nevertheless provided an unequalled opportunity to handle deep and subtle issues before a sophisticated audience. Hence the *Fifteen Sermons* on the natural law which he published in 1726, “very abstruse. and difficult” as he said himself in the preface to the second edition, 1729. Editors are no help; one must master the text itself; but personally I have a distinct preference for Bernard’s 1913 edition and think the more recent edition by Dean Matthews, 1949, of *no value* the moment one leaves the *ipsissima verba*. Where the issues are eternal, being modern is rather a handicap than an advantage, for the modern mind fails to see that there *are* eternal issues.

At the wealthy rectory of Stanhope, in the north of England, after 1726, Butler matured the *Analogy* and published it in 1736. But from 1733 on he was much in London, and indeed at court; he became a close acquaintance of Queen Caroline and her theological circle, which included Berkeley. Owen Chadwick, the best commentator to date on Newman’s *Essay on Development*, falls short of perfection due to his want of understanding of Butler, but he has preserved a happy anecdote from this phase of Butler’s career: “‘My religion,’ said Sir Robert Walpole to Queen Caroline when she tried to persuade him to read Butler’s *Analogy*, ‘is fixed: I do not want to change or improve it.’”²⁷ Butler had that disturbing seriousness which leaves

²⁴ See note 6 above.

²⁵ *Lancelot Andrews, Selected Essays* p.333

²⁶ Phrases quoted are from Bayne, R., .Introduction to the Everyman edition of the *Analogy*, 1906, pp. viii-x.

²⁷ Chadwick, Owen, *From Bossuet to Newman*, Cambridge 1957, p. 77.

nothing uncriticized. The Queen on her death-bed, where Butler attended her, asked the King to promote him. The King therefore, the year following, 1738, offered him the Bishopric of Bristol – “not very suitable either to the condition of my fortune or the circumstances of my preferment; nor, as I should have thought, answerable to the recommendation with which I was honoured,” as Butler noted to Walpole.²⁸ Bristol was a poor diocese, later suppressed. Stanhope’s wealth, however, enabled him to sustain its poverty until in 1740 he resigned Stanhope to become Dean of Saint Paul’s and divide his year between Bristol and London. Butler never married. He spent his money building. Personally I believe the building, no less than the celibacy, to be a point of some philosophical significance; philosophy demands a home; it is an environment for the whole physical person of man, not for the tongue only. The style of Butler’s building led, during this period of little activity, to charges of popery; his London home had stained-glass windows of the Apostles; but this did not prevent his preferment in 1750 to Durham, which put him at the top of the tree. “The change of station in itself,” he observed with characteristic lack of enthusiasm, “will in no wise answer the trouble of it.”²⁹ As Bishop of Bristol and Dean of Saint Paul’s he had published six more sermons, separately, between 1739 and 1748. His last work was *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy at the Visitation of Durham* in 1751. “We should,” he wrote there of current unbelief, “study what Saint James, with wonderful elegance and expressiveness, calls ‘meekness of wisdom’ ... especially towards these men.”³⁰ For posterity, then, Butler means a thousand pages of print, distinguished in every line by the awful candour of the meek. Even these, in Gladstone’s edition, I found uncut in the library of a great Canadian theological institution, my own, to wit.

His dealings with his contemporaries, what little we know of them, are not particularly illuminating. His one interview with Wesley, who came to Bristol from America the year Butler came there, 1738, has a full record in John’s *Journals*. “I once thought you and Mr. Whitfield well-meaning men. But I cannot think so now ... You have no business here. You are not commissioned to preach in this diocese.”³¹ So Butler foreshadowed the inevitable Wesleyan secession. This prevented John neither from preaching in Bristol nor from admiring the author of “that fine book,” as he called it, the *Analogy*. His relations with Hume, who sought his patronage, likewise tell us a lot about Hume, but nothing about Butler. Hume describes himself at work rewriting the *Treatise*, cutting off its nobler parts, that is, endeavouring it shall give little offence as possible; before which, I could not pretend to put it into Dr. Butler’s hand. This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself,

²⁸ Bartlett, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁰ Gladstone’s edition, vol. II, p. 335.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 366-7.

though I believe none of my friends will blame me. But I was resolved not to be an enthusiast in philosophy, while I was blaming other enthusiasms.³² Bartlett devoted an entire chapter of his *Butler* to Berkeley, but in fact we know nothing whatever of the relations between the two. Even Seeker, whom Butler converted to Anglican Christianity, and who, as Archbishop of Canterbury, defended Butler's name after his death, gives us no impression of warm intimacy between them. The Durham annalist's picture of Butler, as a sage "of most reverent aspect, his face thin and pale ... his white hair hung gracefully on his shoulders ... his whole figure patriarchal,"³³ rings true precisely because it brings out the man's remoteness.

The two reforms within the Anglican Church to which the Bishop of Bristol lent the immense weight of his purely personal authority were the education of the poor and missions in the colonies, both of which he presented to the rising middle-class of London as obligations of the strictest sort. Though foreshadowing the establishment of an Anglican hierarchy in the colonies, he tackled the missionary question in what we should call an ecumenical spirit, and when in the House of Lords he defended the Anglican Settlement he once more did so ecumenically, arguing that civic toleration was an intrinsic part of it "a religious establishment without a toleration of such as think they cannot in conscience conform to it, is itself a general tyranny; because it claims absolute authority over conscience." This principle obliged him in logic, but also enabled him in logic, to explain why such toleration was denied to Catholics. From his very brief passage on this question, it emerges that there was a two-fold scandal in Butler's soul where Catholicism was concerned. One was Boniface VIII's ambiguous, and to that extent misleading phrase, that the civil power is exercised *ad nutum sacerdotis*, at the priest's nod, true enough, in a sense, when the civil ruler goes to confession, but true only then, and with crucial qualifications. But for Butler, "whoever will consider the popish claims, to the disposal of the whole earth, as of divine right, the claims to supreme absolute authority in religion ... may see, that it is manifest, open usurpation of all human and divine authority." So, too, secondly, the use of the term *persequere*, hunt down, in the oath taken by Catholic bishops. "They go on to substitute force instead of argument," and thus make their "antiquity and wide extent" of no value in support of their claims.³⁴

Despite his isolation, and his isolation above all from Catholic thought, no man was better in touch with the basic theological issues of the day, and there is no philosophical or theological thinker of that barren century whom I would put in higher place. Not Kant or Leibniz, whose epistemological solutions founder on that rock of dilemma Butler saw how to avoid; not Saint

³² Bartlett, p. 82.

³³ From Surtee's *History of Durham*, p. 122. See Bayne, p. xvi.

³⁴ *Six Sermons Preached Upon Public Occasions*, sermon V, par. 8.

Alfonso or Billuart who had, the one less feeling for modern doubt, the other less systematic power. He shows his power most decisively in his handling of the technical theological problems that in his day troubled the Roman schools of the Continent – the Quietist question, how far pure love of God and man is possible for us; the Jansenist question, whether conscience is by its very nature able to rule passion; the probabilist question, what is our obligation when we are not certain what our obligation is. He is also explicit enough on the Molinist question, in what some would call a “thomistic” sense, but no more so than the Anglican liturgy, which reinforces the doctrine of Article X with scores of collects drawn from the old Latin liturgies. The probabilist debate was the hottest of Butler’s own day; it engaged the main energies of the scholastic universities in the twilight years before the French Revolution swept them all away, and was by far the most voluminous controversy in the history of print to that date. The dust has not yet settled, and it is hard for the student confused by bad terminology and the mortmain of old party rivalries to appreciate the independent method and language of Butler, and it is hard for the scholastic, and for any Continental Catholic, to conceive that the English of Butler could be a finer tool of theological inquiry than the crystalline Latin or French of, say, Billuart. Butler’s phrase, probability the guide of life, has been little understood and much misunderstood. What he said in the first instance, in his sermon on Balaam, was that *conscience* is the guide of life. But conscience must be guided by the probable; meaning by this, that which, while not strictly demonstrable, cannot be disproved and consorts with what evidence there is, where as its logical opposite cannot be proven and consorts less well (that is, explains less, or is less easily explained by) whatever evidence there is. Butler’s meaning of the word probable is not in the least obscure; it is clearly expressed in the original preface of the *Analogy*. And unless we accept this category there can be no such thing as faith and no such thing as conscience informed by faith.

I do not proceed here to expound the whole doctrine of conscience and probability in the *Analogy*, and his beautiful understanding of how man, and particularly modern man, is in a state of intellectual trial during his life and of how this intellectual trial (save that, as Burke observed, conduct is “the only language that rarely lies) is always more fundamental than any moral trial. But it is worth while in passing drawing attention to some early sentences on this question in a letter to Clarke. More succinctly than anything I have ever, seen they put the finger on the basic fallacy of Probabilism as a moral system. Newman set great store by this letter; I believe he presented it to Oriel in 1852, and he certainly communicated a copy of it to Gladstone. “Suppose,” writes Butler, “I have two diversions offered me, *both* of which I could not enjoy, I like both of them, but yet have a *stronger* inclination to one than to the other, I am not indeed strictly *indifferent* to either, because I should be glad to enjoy both; but am I not exactly *in the same case, to all intents and purposes of acting* as though I was *absolutely indifferent* to that diversion

which I have the least inclination to?”³⁵ For *diversion* substitute *opinion* and you have the true solution to the probabilist question.

“The period,” wrote Walter Bagehot, “may be defined as that in which men ceased to write for students and had not begun to write for women.” In my opinion it did more than any other period to define the exact nature of the Anglican allegiance because the substantial attraction of Anglicanism is simply the aptness of the English tongue as the vehicle for religious experience and its analysis. In Butler’s day that vernacular came into the possession of an entire culture. It was subjected, in a man like Butler, not only to the conversational discipline of relevance, tact and point, but also to severe reflection on the nature and use of language. The great advantage Butler had over his Catholic contemporaries was his full exposure to the Enlightenment, not just its juvenile polemics, but also its solid positive achievement in physics, economics and the rest. Such exposure is a condition of health for theology, whose object is no abstraction but God Himself at work. By their fruits you know them. Chateaubriand is no answer to Gibbon; Newman on development is; and Butler, as he very generously acknowledged, laid down his method. So, too, though we still read *Candide*, we never read the Catholic apologetes it pillories, what we read is Butler. He would lose nothing precious that his age might value. Even the Romantic cult of ecstasy, of which the enthusiasm of Butler’s day was one precursor, has no answer but the answer Butler gave at the conclusion of his sermons on friendship and love:

I have seen an end of all perfection. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever. Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before Him?

Butler never echoes Scripture rhetorically, and seldom collated Scripture texts in this manner. His achievement, continuous with Newman’s, was a hard-working, clear, nervous prose in which the language of prophecy lives still in the force of its original and literal meaning. Analogy is the key to the interpretation of Scripture because it was the method by which the language of the prophetic tradition was elaborated in the first place. What analogical thinking wrote only analogical thinking will understand. And Butler is a classic, not only of English, but of scientific theology as a living tradition, because of this ability to isolate essentials.

³⁵ Gladstone, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 358.60.