

BISHOP BUTLER AS PHILOSOPHER-THEOLOGIAN

THIS year marks the 200th anniversary of the death of one of the greatest philosopher-theologians in the history of the Church, and possibly the greatest British moral philosopher, namely, Bishop Joseph Butler of Durham.

Though leading philosophers like Sir W. D. Ross, C. D. Broad, E. F. Carritt and others pay high tribute to Butler, for it is they who suggest he is probably Britain's greatest moral philosopher, we cannot say the same of theologians. We find Hastings Rashdall writing a somewhat supercilious article on Butler which appears in his book, *God and Man*, while we find E. L. Mascall blaming Butler for not holding similar views on analogy to himself! We suggest there is a very obvious reason for this lack of appreciation and that it is due to misunderstanding of Butler as a whole, due to an attempt to sever Butler's themes from their context as a whole, and consider him under whatever phase of thought one is chiefly interested in.

Butler has always suffered from this.

One is amazed to read thus about him almost everywhere he is mentioned and to observe that his works are rarely if ever regarded as a whole. Butler is usually considered either as a moral philosopher of front rank or as a great and significant theologian for his time, but not as what he is—Bishop Butler, philosopher-theologian, and other things that belong together. Yet it is only when he is thus considered that he can be fully understood and appreciated. Butler himself would insist on this as we may see by reading his works with their continual emphasis on trying to see things as a whole and an insistence that there is a whole to be detected even though this whole is beyond the capacities of man in its entirety; in fact, he says, "nor can man give the whole account of any one thing."

Paradoxical as this may seem, it is easily understood when viewed in the background of his works.

Furthermore, it is not an answer to this neglect to say, as some do, that Butler is not systematic. He is not. Neither is Plato: neither is nature, or Shakespeare, or the Bible! Why should they be? No; we should not conclude that because Butler is not systematic therefore he is not consistent and can be studied as though his works were a disconnected selection of

essays on various themes, each of which may be regarded best in their separate spheres. That is decidedly not so!

For it is not only true that Butler regarded things as a whole and was always striving to express and understand them as a whole, but also that he recognizes a certain consistency of thought wherever, as he expresses it in the introduction to his *Sermons*, anyone "writes with simplicity and in earnest". Can there be the least doubt that Butler wrote "with simplicity and in earnest"?

And what is more, Butler wrote with a purpose in mind, That purpose was apologetic. He was, in his own gracious and scholarly way, a defender of the Faith. And when we ask *what* faith he was defending and *how* he defended it, we become increasingly aware of the inner consistency that binds his works together and that necessitates taking them as a whole in order fully to appreciate Butler. Of course it is true that we may do a very large measure of justice to Butler by considering him either as a moral philosopher, or as a psychologist, or as a theologian. But we shall never do full justice to him until we take him as a whole. All the eloquent tributes to Butler as one of these simply adds to the necessity of considering him as a whole.

If we turn to the faith he was defending we discover it is best described as a metaphysic, in the Kantian sense of this term, i.e. as "God, freedom and immortality". There are other elements and all of them are unmistakable and important, but these are a very good foundation. Then, if we ask how he defended this metaphysic, we discover that his method was empirical method by analogy. No one can read Butler's works (not simply his *Analogy*) without observing these things governing them and binding them together: namely, defence of a metaphysic by means of empirical method based on analogy.

This comes out all through his works as we shall show. Note how it works out in his approach to the existence of God. Though Butler never seeks to prove the existence of God, but rather assumes His existence, nevertheless he shows that there is ample evidence in nature, morals and religion to show that there is a God who manifests Himself by creative and providential acts and therefore in experience. His faith in God permeates his works. For Butler, God is in control, and because He is in control all is well and things are moving towards a divinely ordained end, therefore evil cannot finally

triumph despite evidence that seems to contradict this. He is not an enthusiastic optimist like Browning in his "God's in His heaven, All's right with the world". No indeed! He is a more cold and calculating believer than Browning. Therefore some are inclined to see him as a pessimist, for example John Oman, and to some extent he was. But not entirely so. We cannot classify him thus if we take into account the numerous notes of optimism due to his faith in the sovereignty of God. Canon Scott Holland wrote an essay on *Butler as Optimist!* Better say he was a realist. That is a more likely clue to Butler. His pessimism arose out of facts. So did his optimism. He was always interested in facts, for he was a confirmed empiricist who sought, as he tells us, to avoid "building a world on hypothesis . . . like Descartes", and tried to build on the more solid basis of reflection on experience. He would have said with Dr. Émile Cailliet, "Concepts without precepts are empty," and with Kant, "Precepts without concepts are blind."

And so the more we study him the more we are constrained to appreciate him as one who sought to see things as a whole because he was convinced things were a whole, and that only in seeing things as a whole can we understand them. Yet he was equally insistent that our capacities do not permit us to see this whole in its entirety. We see suggestions of it. But not the whole. And Butler believed in it because experience taught him this and also because he considered God to be in control working out a divinely ordained plan to its appointed end. With such a metaphysic governing his works and such a method consistently applied throughout, his works could not be anything else but a consistent whole—that is, of course, if this metaphysic and method are applied throughout his works. This indicates and demands consistency. Not consistency with any school of thought or system, or even with facts, but consistency with itself.

We believe that Butler is consistent in this way.

Observe how it comes out in his doctrine of man as a constitution of parts working harmoniously together under the authority of conscience. He divides man into three: (1) passions or impulses, (2) benevolence and self-love, (3) conscience or reflection. Man is not man until these are functioning together as a whole in the right relationship of parts, like a watch. This right relationship for Butler is under the authority of conscience. Nor is that all. It is related by him to the will of God,

just as conscience is related to the "voice of God" within. God has a hand in this. So Butler sees man as a whole, a "system" or "constitution" or "scheme"—in fact he sees everything in such terms, for that is how he thinks and speaks of nature, morals, religion and the over-all government of God—he sees man as a whole under divine government. And this seeing man as a whole is, we submit, evidence of his genius, for the very simple reason that it provides a decisive answer to those whom he was opposing, such as the naturalist Hobbes, and the deist Shaftesbury, who took partial views of man; and it also leaves him the advantage of not denying what is true in his opponents while he carries truth along with him as a whole and not in any departmental sense as most other thinkers do.

Observe it also in his doctrine of analogy. The very use of the doctrine of analogy, as Butler used it, implies an inner significance in the similarity between things that leads us to connect them and thus learn the "laws" and "general principles" on which things are governed. If things were not a whole, if this were not one world, if there were not one mind behind all, there would not be the significance in analogy that Butler assumes there is, and concludes he has a right to assume because empirical facts establish the analogy. Note how this works out in his famous *Analogy*, which is a reasoned, logical statement of the *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Course and Constitution of Nature*. And note that the same idea of analogy is present in his *Sermons* and in the *Dissertation of a Future Life* and the *Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*. Butler writes, in the *Analogy*: "Indeed this natural and moral constitution and government of the world are so connected as to make up together but one scheme . . . every act of divine justice and goodness may be supposed to look beyond itself and its immediate object; may have reference to other parts of God's moral administration, and to a general moral plan; and that every circumstance of this moral government may be adjusted beforehand with a view to the whole of it." And we hasten to add that Butler is not here dealing with hypothesis, which he always avoids, but is still insisting on the empirical method, for he writes on this issue: "upon the whole there is a kind of moral government implied in God's natural government; virtue and vice are naturally rewarded and punished as beneficial and mischievous to society; and rewarded and punished directly as virtue and vice. The notion then of a

moral scheme of government is not fictitious but natural, for it is suggested to our thought by the constitution and course of nature: and the execution of this scheme is actually begun in the instances here mentioned." In other words the analogy is there because this *is* one world, under *one* Governor who controls it in accordance with His divine principles and laws, and this is observed in our own experience of these laws and government.

Not only is this consistency found in his doctrine of man and of analogy, but it is also found in other elements in his works such as his doctrine of probability as "the very guide of life" and intuitive awareness of right and wrong.

There are two more points that should be noted because they are important to an understanding of Butler, and also because they are often misconstrued. First, Butler's is not a merely negative argument. He is not saying merely that because we find the same difficulties in knowledge of the course and constitution of nature as in religion natural and revealed, therefore religion is credible. He is saying that. But he is saying something considerably more, for he is also saying that in addition to the same difficulties we also have the same positive grounds of agreement. It is where we find not only the same difficulties but the same agreements that we have analogy! That religious knowledge is equally credible with other knowledge is the positive side of Butler's argument, and it should not be ignored. The reason Butler claims that it is equally credible is because it is based on the same method, namely empiricism. These should not be divided.

And the second matter is closely related to this as Butler proceeds to talk about supernatural revelation. We may think he is mistaken here, but we are completely wrong if we think, as some seem to do, that he writes with his tongue in his cheek. This is not so. Butler is absolutely and completely sincere. His method is to take our natural capacities as far as they will go, and having done so, he does not profess to have said the last word, but turns to supernatural revelation. He believes that God intervenes—that God speaks. Why not? If there is a God, and one believes in Him as sincerely as Butler does, and if God is what Butler conceives Him to be, then there is not the slightest inconsistency in Butler's positing supernatural revelation. Here, as usual, Butler is quite consistent with his premises, and turns to supernatural revelation, not merely as a hypothesis,

but as an established fact of historic experience as seen in Jesus Christ and in other historical factors to which Butler points.

Therefore, however we account for it, Butler believes implicitly in supernatural revelation. He considers it to be a fact of experience and a necessity. He says two things about it that are worthy of attention.

(a) It should always be tested, as far as possible, by empirical tests. "The account now given of Christianity most strongly shows and enforces upon us the obligation of searching the scriptures in order to see what the scheme of revelation really is, instead of determining beforehand from reason what the scheme of it ought to be." That is sound common sense, which if followed would not leave us as is so often the case, with concepts that are empty, theology that floats in the atmosphere of mental vapours.

(b) It is to be thought of as revelation of what is beyond experience in the ordinary sense of the term, so he writes of "things not discoverable by reason", or again as follows: "This therefore we must discover either from experience or revelation. And experience the present case does not admit of. Therefore revelation is necessary. Yet this must not be taken to mean that therefore we discard either reason or experience." Reason and experience are his constant criterion. "I express myself with caution lest I should be mistaken to vilify reason; which is the only faculty which we have wherewith to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself."

Our theme is Bishop Butler as philosopher-theologian, for we are trying to emphasize Butler's consistency in the sense that his works are a whole because bound together by defence of a metaphysic on the basis of empirical method by analogy. No one has spoken more highly of Butler as both moral philosopher and theologian than Professor C. D. Broad in his well-known work on ethics, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, and in an excellent article in the *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. xxi, July 1923, where he writes: "It appears to me that Butler's work as a moralist must be ranked extremely high. The writer with whom one naturally compares him in this respect is Kant, and I do not think he suffers by comparison with the great German thinker." A competent critic could hardly say more. Others have spoken equally highly and this makes it all the more pitiable to read Hastings Rashdall's supercilious dismissal, "A selection of good replies to objections which are not now made, and untenable

replies to those that are still urged "; especially because Rashdall is a great thinker whom we personally admire and appreciate. Theologians have not done justice to Butler. All Gladstone's herculean efforts created but a small ripple on the pond of their indifference! This is their loss and not his, for his theology will come to the fore as his ethics have.

We sincerely trust that this two hundredth anniversary of his death may see a resurgence of interest in his works and a fuller evaluation of his greatness.

Professor Broad writes of his ethics: " though his system is incomplete, it does seem to contain the prolegomena to any system of ethics that can claim to do justice to the facts of moral experience." This is true. And in keeping with the thesis of this article we desire to insist that it is also true of his theology. He is not merely a theologian who lost his way and strayed into moral philosophy, nor is he a great moral philosopher astray amongst theologians, he is a truly eminent philosopher-theologian.

Until this is appreciated we cannot have a full or adequate interpretation of Bishop Butler.

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