

Zeitschrift: Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review
Band: 11 (1903)
Heft: 43

Artikel: Dr. Joseph Butler : bishop of Durham
Autor: Meyrick, F.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403570>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 15.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

DR. JOSEPH BUTLER, BISHOP OF DURHAM¹⁾.

II.

I have already sketched the Ethical system of Bishop Butler, and I now proceed to his great Apologetic work, commonly known as "The Analogy". This is only an abbreviation of the title given to it by its author, which is, "The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the constitution and course of Nature"; and by "The constitution and course of Nature" the Bishop means that which we experience in daily life under the Providential government of God. The full title indicates, much more clearly than the popular abbreviation, what is the purpose of the treatise. It is addressed not to Atheists but to Deists, and its typical argument is this—You say that you will not accept the religious system proposed to you because it contains something which, being unreasonable or unjust, could not have come from God: but if you look closely, you will find that same thing in the ordinary course of the world's government, which you allow is God's government, and therefore you are illogical in rejecting in religion as unreasonable and unjust and unbecoming to God, that which you accept as coming from His hand in daily life. For example, you will have nothing to do with Christianity because it teaches the value of vicarious suffering, but look at our daily life; do not you see instances on instances of the value to one man of the sufferings undergone in his behalf by another? Be consistent: either say with the Epicurean that there is no God who providentially governs the world, which goes on by haphazard or by mechanical

¹⁾ See N° 41 of January 1903, p. 75-82.

laws, or do not object to Christianity because it has a characteristic which it shares with the course of Nature, directed, as you acknowledge, by God.

There are two classes of objections brought against religion: one *a posteriori*, this *did* not happen and I *do* not believe it; the other *a priori*, this could not happen and I *cannot* believe it. The best argument that we have to meet the *a posteriori* difficulties is that of Archdeacon Paley, in his *Evidences of Christianity*. The best argument against the *a priori* difficulties is to be found in the present treatise of Bishop Butler.

The treatise consists of two parts, the first dealing with natural religion, the second with revealed religion. At the beginning stands a preliminary chapter, the purpose of which is to prove the likelihood of a future life, in which the Bishop argues that neither the reason of the thing, nor the analogy of nature should lead us to believe that we ourselves perish with the dissolution of the bodies with which we are connected. In this chapter there are passages here and there, which have to be corrected, owing to the extension of our knowledge of natural science since the days of the author; but whether this be done or no, the argument, as a whole, stands firm, and leaves us, not with the certainty, but yet with the probability, of our future existence. The credibility of a future life is a foundation stone both of natural and revealed religion. Natural and revealed religion differ in this: Natural religion is that which we can attain to by the exercise of our reason, intuition and our other faculties, and consists of religious regards to God the Father. Revealed religion is a republication of natural religion, and, in addition, it teaches us our relation to God the Son and God the Holy Ghost (of which natural religion knows nothing certain) and it gives an account of a dispensation of things, not discoverable by reason, in consequence of which several distinct precepts are enjoined us.

The objection first proposed is that both natural and revealed religion represent God as dealing out punishment to men for the transgression of His precepts—a thing supposed to be unworthy of the greatness of God, considering the weakness and littleness of man. The answer from Analogy is, God deals with us in a similar manner in daily life. Walk along a

path bordering a precipice, transgress the law of gravitation by stepping off the path, and you are punished for your transgression by death. Why take that as a fatal objection in religion which you experience in every day life without shrinking?

But, continues the opponent, you require that God should dispense His rewards and punishments according as men are righteous or wicked and their action good or evil. You do not find that He does that in daily life. Do you not? answers the disciple of Butler. Do you not find that virtue is rewarded both by the temper of mind that it begets in the virtuous man—calmness, serenity, peacefulness—and by the affection and respect that it generates in others? And is not vice punished by pains of body and remorse of mind and by the consciousness of the disapprobation of those most worthy of respect? God is not only the Governor, but the Moral Governor of the world and though, for reasons partially hidden from us, there are hindrances which prevent virtue being always rewarded and vice punished, yet no one can doubt that the *tendency* of virtue is to produce happiness and of vice to bring about unhappiness and “these things are to be considered as a declaration of the author of nature for virtue and against vice; they give a credibility to the supposition of their being rewarded and punished hereafter and also ground to hope and to fear that they may be rewarded and punished in higher degrees than they are here.” (Ch. III.)

Another point in both natural and revealed religion which the sceptic refuses to believe is that in this life we are in a state of probation for another; that our future estate will depend on our conduct here, and that we are intended to discipline ourselves so as to be more fitted for a higher life hereafter. The answer, as supplied by analogy, is that we find some parts of our present life to be times of preparation for other parts, e. g., our childhood and youth serve as a preparation for the higher estate to which we arrive on maturity, and the happiness or misery of our later life is made to depend on the way in which we have used our earlier years; if we have used the events which have happened to us in a way to improve our characters we find serenity and peace in our later years; if we have given way to the temptations which have

assailed us, we bring upon ourselves misery arising both from our internal tempers and from our external relations.

“The former part of life, then, is to be considered as an important opportunity, which nature puts into our hands, and which, when lost, is not to be recovered. And our being placed in a state of discipline throughout this life for another world, is a providential disposition of things, exactly of the same kind as our being placed in a state of discipline during childhood, for mature age. Our condition in both respects, is uniform and of a piece, and comprehended under one and the same general law of nature.” (Ch. V.)

“And the alternative is left to our choice, either to improve ourselves, and better our condition, or, in default of such improvement, to remain deficient and wretched. It is therefore perfectly credible, from the analogy of nature, that the same may be our case with respect to the happiness of a future state, and the qualifications necessary for it.” (Ibidem.)

The opponent may now be supposed to burst in with a very far reaching objection. There can be no rewards and punishments of men hereafter for their actions here, because all their doings and failures are the result of the law of necessity. They could not have done otherwise and therefore there was no merit or demerit in what they did or did not, and consequently no man deserves to be either rewarded or punished. For himself, Butler repudiates the doctrine of necessity (Part II, ch. VIII); but he is not satisfied with that. He proceeds to argue that if it is reconcileable with the constitution of nature (which is the position of his adversary) it is equally reconcileable with religion. Whatever theoretical perplexities may surround the question, the law of necessity, if it exists, must hold throughout. Now in daily life we know that we are treated *as though* we were free; we can lift up our hand and drop it, we can bring suffering upon ourselves by some acts and enjoyment by others. Why should not the same principle hold good in the religious sphere as that which we experience day by day?

“From the whole, therefore, it must follow, that a necessity, supposed possible, and reconcileable with the constitution of things, does in no sort prove that the author of nature will not, nor destroy the proof that he will, finally, and upon the

whole, in his eternal government, render his creatures happy or miserable, by some means or other, as they behave well or ill. Or, to express this conclusion in words conformable to the title of the chapter (ch. VI), the analogy of nature shows us, that the opinion of necessity, considered as practical, is false."

The final chapter of the first part of the treatise deals with a difficulty felt by many and regarded by some as an objection both to natural and revealed religion. This is that they contain a number of things which we cannot understand and the reason of the existence of which we are unable to comprehend. For example why should evil exist at all, or why should it be so powerful and dominant? The explanation of such difficulties is that God's government is a vast scheme with some few parts of which alone we are acquainted; if we knew more, we should understand more. But besides this, analogous difficulties exist in the natural world. We cannot understand the use of deserts, mountains, and arctic seas, nor can we explain many of the ways of God in His natural government any more than in His moral government, although we can go some little way towards doing so by recognising things which in themselves appear merely evil as means, possibly necessary means, to good ends, and by realising that the general laws which God imposes on the works of His hands, if they seem on occasion to produce harm, are yet in the whole more conducive to good than incessant interpositions.

From the first part, then, of Butler's treatise we learn, (1) that the dissolution of our bodies is no proof of the annihilation of ourselves, nor does it make such a result probable; (2) that the representation that hereafter God will reward virtue and punish vice is justified by the analogy of nature, in which we see that He acts in a similar manner; (3) that the representation that the present life is a state of probation for a future life and that it is intended by its trials and discipline to lead to our improvement is similarly justified; (4) that if there are things that we cannot comprehend in religion, so there are in the world and its Providential government; and all this, whether the doctrine of necessity be theoretically accepted or not. If therefore a man believes that the constitution of nature comes

from God, that is, if he be a Deist, he is bound not to object to natural and revealed religion on any of the above grounds.

Passing on from the considerations which belong to natural and revealed religion in common to those confined specifically to revealed religion, the Bishop prefixes a chapter on the importance of Christianity. He was living in an age which were frankly irreligious and contemptuous of Christianity, and he therefore takes frequent occasion to remind his readers that they could not safely disregard revelation, even though they were but half, or less than half, convinced of the probability of its being true.

Christianity is, Butler says, (1) an authoritative republication of natural religion; (2) an account of a new religious dispensation. Regarded as an inward principle, natural religion consists in religious regards to God the Father Almighty; and revealed religion in religious regards to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, in addition to God the Father. As soon as these relations are known (however they may be known), duties at once arise on our parts towards Christ and the Holy Spirit, such as reverence, honour, love, trust, gratitude, fear, hope and obedience, as well as those which we owe to God the Father. Revealed religion contains more than natural religion but cannot be contradictory to it.

“Indeed, if in revelation there he found any passages, the seeming meaning of which is contrary to natural religion, we may most certainly conclude such seeming meaning not to be the real one. But it is not any degree of a presumption against an interpretation of scripture, that such interpretation contains a doctrine which the light of nature cannot discover, or a precept, which the law of nature does not oblige to.” (Ch. I, part 2.)

Having set aside the *a priori* presumptions against revelation in general as being not discoverable by reason and being miraculous, the Bishop proceeds to deal with the objections brought against the Christian revelation in particular. In every revelation, the Christian included, there must be things appearing liable to objections, for, speaking broadly, we are not judges of what a revelation is likely to be, or ought to be, but only of its evidence, that is, whether it comes from God or no.

Reason can, and ought to judge (1) of the meaning of revelation, (2) of its morality, (3) of its evidence. If reason goes beyond this and pretends to declare what is or what is not to be expected in revelation, it passes out of its proper sphere and is not to be listened to. Very often its objections can be met by the argument from analogy. For example, if it be maintained that it is incredible that Christianity, professing to be an expedient to recover the world from ruin, should have made its appearance so late, it may be answered from analogy that though men have from the beginning been liable to diseases, yet the remedies for those maladies remained unknown to mankind for many ages and to a great extent are unknown still. Christianity being a scheme quite beyond our comprehension it is to be expected that there would be many things in it that would be contrary to our expectations.

The chiefest objection brought against Christianity, is that it teaches the appointment of a Mediator and the redemption of the world by Him. But the analogy of nature removes all presumption against the use by God of the mediation of others. Our infancy is preserved by the instrumentality of others and when we put ourselves in a position of danger it is often only by another's coming to our relief and our laying hold on that relief that we can be saved. In some cases of misdoing fatal results must follow were it not for the assistance of others; and this therefore may be our case in respect to our future interests. Further, we often see that repentance alone is not sufficient to prevent evils that we have incurred falling upon us in this world, which may suggest to us that the same principle is likely to hold in respect to the future, and makes us ready to welcome the doctrine that God has given His Son to make interposition in such a manner as to prevent the punishment from actually following, which would otherwise have followed on the transgression of the divine laws. There are three ways in which Christ is our mediator (1) as Prophet, inasmuch as he introduced a new dispensation; (2) as King, inasmuch as he instituted and rules his Church; (3) as Priest, inasmuch as he offered himself as a propitiatory sacrifice, and made atonement for the sins of the world. In what particular way his sacrifice had this efficacy is not made perfectly evident, but the fact is clearly revealed. It has been objected to the

doctrine that it represents God as punishing the innocent for the guilty. The analogy of nature helps us to answer the difficulty. When in the daily course of natural providence innocent people are made to suffer for the faults of the guilty, this is liable to the same objection as that brought against the satisfaction of Christ. In ordinary life, one person's sufferings often contribute to the relief of another, so that vicarious punishment is a providential appointment of every day's experience.

The objection therefore does not lie against Christianity any more than against the constitution of nature, however mysterious to us with our limited faculties the divine law may be. We must not expect fully to understand all God's laws; for "the constitution of the world and God's natural government over it is all mystery, as much as the Christian dispensation". We are not to expect as full information concerning the divine conduct as concerning our own duty.

Another objection to revelation is that it was not universal, or made to all alike. "But we should observe that the Author of nature in numberless instances bestows that upon some which he does not upon others who seem equally to stand in need of it; indeed He appears to bestow all His gifts with the most promiscuous variety among creatures of the same species, health and strength, capacities of prudence and of knowledge, means of improvement, riches, and all external advantages. Yet, notwithstanding these uncertainties and varieties God does exercise a natural government over the world"; so "that the disadvantages of some in comparison of others respecting religion may be paralleled by manifest analogies in the natural dispensations of Providence at present, and considering ourselves merely in our temporal capacity". (Ch. VI.)

A further objection to revelation is the supposed deficiency in the proof of it. The reason of this may be, that we may be placed in a state of probation in respect to our intellects as well as to our moral practice. Speculative difficulties in respect to religion may make the principal part of some person's trial, as temptations to ill-life do to others. Analogously, we have great difficulty often in deciding wherein our temporal interests really consists, and whether we have sufficient proof to justify us in pursuing one or another line in order to attain

to them; yet in spite of this doubtfulness we do pursue it. In either case the doubt what we ought to do or believe is often the result of a man's own fault, but not always. After we have passed the best judgement that we can, the evidence upon which we must act often appears to us still doubtful.

Passing from the *a priori* objection to the Christian revelation and the answers supplied to them by Analogy, the Bishop comes to the particular evidence for it. This evidence is either direct or indirect. Its direct evidence consists in the attestation to its truth supplied by miracles wrought by those who were instrumental in propagating it and in the fulfilment by it of prophecies already in existence. And besides these two, which are "its direct and fundamental proofs", there are also "collateral proofs", which "however considerable they are, yet ought never to be urged apart from the direct proofs but always to be joined with them" (ch. VII).

With respect to miracles the Bishop notes that there is equal historical evidence for these as for other facts in the Scripture narrative; that St Paul is an independent testimony to their existence, declaring himself to be endued with the power of working them (Rom. XV, 19; 1 Cor. XIV, 18) and recounting the many miraculous gifts which subsisted in the Church of Corinth, and that as an historical fact Christianity demanded to be received and was actually received upon the allegation of miracles publicly wrought to attest the truth of it. The historical testimony is not to be done away with by the plea that men are liable to be misled by enthusiasm; that some have been half-deceived and half-deceivers; and that claims have been made to the miraculous which are false. Testimony must as a rule be accepted unless we find a want either of the *posse* or of the *velle* in those who give it.

On prophecy Butler remarks that "if a long series of prophecy delivered before the coming of Christ is applicable to Him, that is in itself a proof that the prophetic history was intended of Him", though each several prophecy be also applicable to events of the age in which it was written. Collateral evidence may be derived from the history and character of the revelation.

As the first part of the Analogy proved to the Deist that objections to the doctrines of future rewards and punishments for good and bad conduct, and of this world being a state of probation for the next and for individual improvement, were untenable, because analogous to God's dealings under His providential dispensation, so the second part proves to him that for the same reason objections to Christ's Mediation and Redemption by Him, and cavils at the Christian revelation on the ground of its want of universality and on alleged deficiency in its proof are untenable, and consequently that he is left free, without presumption to the contrary, to consider the particular evidence for Christianity.

I have not space to apply Butler's principles to the religious state of the world and its needs at the present time with the fulness that I should desire. The following observations must be sufficient.

(1) We must not give up our beliefs because we find that we have not demonstrative proof for them, but only probable evidence, which admit of higher and lower degrees; nor because objections lie against them, for every thing is open to objections brought against it by us owing to our imperfect knowledge.

(2) We must confine the reason to its proper work in matters of alleged revelation. That is, to discovering its meaning, judging of its morality and examining its evidence. If reason usurpes the right of criticizing and approving or condemning the several doctrines of the revelation acknowledged to come from God, it is not to be listened to.

(3) Miracles are not to be regarded as vexatious excrescences which have to be thrust into corners, explained away or apologized for, but as attestations by God to the teaching of those who are enabled to perform them. Testimony to their having been wrought is to be accepted on the same conditions as other testimony by those who believe to a divine governor of the world.

(4) Prophecies of Christ are not to be evacuated of their Messianic meaning.

A perusal of much of our modern theological literature will show that each of these warnings is greatly needed at the

present time. We may derive them from a study of Butler's works.

III.

Bishop Butler, a sketch of whose system of morals we inserted in our January number, was born in 1692. When he was as yet only 22 years of age, he exhibited a taste for metaphysical speculation which characterised him throughout his life. Dr Samuel Clarke had published a Demonstration of the Being and attributes of God. Butler was intensely interested by this work, but he was not satisfied that it effected a demonstration, however probable it made it. He therefore wrote to Dr Clarke a letter, marked by a becoming modesty, in which he laid before him his difficulties, and requested a solution. Five letters passed between the correspondents carried on with great deference on the part of young Butler, and of sympathy and respect on the part of Dr Clarke. Butler wrote: "As I design the search after truth as the business of my life, I shall not be ashamed to learn from any person, but I cannot but be sensible that instruction from some men is like the gift of a prince: it reflects honour on the person, on whom it lays an obligation." Dr Clarke ended the correspondence by saying: "We seem to have pushed the matter in question between us as far as it will go, and, upon the whole, I cannot but take notice I have very seldom met with persons so reasonable and so unprejudiced as yourself in such debates as these."

In 1718, Butler was appointed preacher at the Rolls Chapel, where he continued for 8 years, and during that time he published the Fifteen Sermons which contain his system of moral philosophy. In 1733, on the recommendation of Archbishop Secker, he was appointed Chaplain to the Lord Chancellor, and three years later Clerk of the Closet to Queen Caroline, wife of George II. Queen Caroline, who had far greater intellectual capacity than her husband, commanded the presence of Butler every evening for religious exercises and discussion, and when she died in the following year, she expressed her wish to the King that he might be appointed a Bishop, and accordingly, in 1738, he was nominated to the See of Bristol. It is interesting to know that Butler presented his celebrated treatise the "Analogy of Religion, natural and revealed, to the consti-

tution and course of Nature", to Queen Caroline in manuscript before its publication.

In 1747, Bishop Butler was offered the Archbishopric of Canterbury, but he declined the appointment, and in 1750, he was translated to Durham. The See of Durham at this time was one of great dignity and authority. The Bishop exercised a large hospitality, receiving at his table 3 times a week any of the gentry and clergy who thought fit to come, while at the same time he was fond of paying visits to his clergy in their respective parishes, begging to be received by them with the greatest simplicity.

In 1750 he drew up a scheme for introducing Episcopacy into North America. It was submitted to the government of the day which unhappily declined to adopt it, whereby the American Church was deprived of native episcopal control, till after the war of Independence. In 1752, the Bishop died, and was buried at Bristol. He is thus described by one who had seen him:—"He was of a most reverend aspect; his face thin and pale; but there was a divine placidness in his countenance which inspired veneration, and expressed the most benevolent mind. His white hair hung gracefully on his shoulders, and his whole figure was patriarchal."

Fifteen years after his death, the Church of Rome claimed him, according to its usual practice, as a convert, and asserted that he had died in the communion of that Church. There was as much and as little truth in this claim as there was in the assertion, made immediately after his death, that Dr Döllinger had died in the communion of the Church of Rome. The calumny with regard to Dr Döllinger was at once refuted by Professor Friedrich, and in like manner Archbishop Secker disproved the charge in respect to Butler. There was indeed no foundation for it to rest upon: all that the claimants could say was that in one of his charges he had urged the necessity of external ordinances as well as of personal religion, in order to keep up the profession of Christianity in the country. The only other ground alleged for the charge was that he had set up a cross in his episcopal chapel at Bristol. Such idle charges did not need refutation, particularly when set against a number of passages in his writings in which he refers to the Papal

system as being a corruption of Christianity. Yet Archbishop Secker had to write a series of articles in defence of his departed friend, the last of which ends with these words: "Upon the whole, few accusations, so entirely groundless, have been so pertinaciously, I am unwilling to say maliciously, carried on, as the present; and surely it is high time for the authors and abettors of it, in mere common prudence, to show some regard, if not to truth, at least to shame."

I have already stated that Butler stands first among us as a moralist, and as an apologist. His moral system is contained in his Sermons, his apologetics in his Analogy. Besides three treatises he has left a few Sermons preached on special occasions, and two Dissertations, one on personal Identity, the other on the nature of virtue, the last of which should be read in connexion with his theory of morals.

Blickling, Aylsham, April 27, 1903.

F. MEYRICK.