

Butler's Analogy

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In
Wesley's
Day

Butler's Analogy is the most original and profound work extant in any language on the philosophy of religion." John Wesley read *The Analogy of Religion*

to the Constitution and Course of Nature, by Bishop Joseph Butler, on January 21, 1746. This is his comment—

"A strong and well-wrote treatise; but, I am afraid, far too deep for their understanding to whom it is primarily addressed."

Butler's Analogy was addressed mainly, of course, to those who were inclined to banish God from a world run by a set of mechanical laws needing no supervisor. In the "Advertisement" he says—

"It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world."

Though admitting that he cannot actually prove the validity of religion, Butler skillfully marshals evidence which confirms the moral government of the universe. His book was acknowledged as the coup de grace for the Deistic writers, though he still felt unhappy about the future of religion, refusing the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in 1747 with the words, "It is too late for me to try to support a falling church."

How surprised he must have been to see

the despised Methodists doing this very thing! The same Methodists who had been carpeted before him in Bristol in August, 1739. Though John Wesley's Journal omits the incident, his diary and a manuscript-fragment enable us to reconstruct the interview—or rather interviews, for there were two. Butler concluded—

"Well, sir, since you ask my advice, I will give it you very freely. You have no business here; you are not commissioned to preach in this diocese. Therefore I advise you to go hence."

To which Wesley replied boldly—

"My lord, my business on earth is to do what good I can. Wherever, therefore, I think I can do most good, there must I stay, so long as I think so. At present I think I can do most good here; therefore, here I stay. . . . But if I should be convinced, in the meanwhile, that I could advance the glory of God and the salvation of souls in any other place more than in Bristol, in that hour, by God's help, I will go hence, which till then I may not do."

Two years later Wesley was writing to Butler formally notifying him that some of his Bristol converts wished to be baptised by immersion—and Butler must have read a rebuke between the lines.

Unsuccessful in preventing Wesley from preaching in his diocese, Bishop Butler was also frustrated in his later plan for establishing American bishoprics, which Pitt said would have saved the American colonies for us, and which might have prevented the separation of Methodism from the Church of England. Yet, though some of his ecclesiastical schemes came to naught, Butler had certainly given of his best theologically. Copies of the Analogy and of his Fifteen Sermons were placed by Wesley in the Kingswood School Library—a mental discipline and stimulus for the future leaders of Methodism.

F. B.

“Butler’s Analogy.” *Methodist Recorder* (January 24, 1946): 1

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