Second Edition

Christian Theistic Evidences

Cornelius Van Til

Edited by K. Scott Oliphint

There is no greater misconception about the presuppositional epistemology of Van Til than that it has no place for offering evidences for the truth of Christianity. There is no more important recognition about this epistemology, rooted in Scripture as the self-attesting revelation of the triune God essential for interpreting the whole of reality, than that it provides the only sound basis for a truly compelling presentation of the manifold evidence there is. The value of this seminally important work is greatly enhanced by Oliphint's foreword and his editorial comments throughout.

—Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

Christian Theistic Evidences may not be the catchiest title for an apologetics text, but readers who have digested Van Til's revolutionary insights will understand that it carries a profound double meaning. Not only are there abundant evidences for the truth of Christian theism, but the very idea of "evidences" presupposes the truth of Christian theism. Evidences are, by nature, Christian theistic. If the sovereign God of the Bible exists, they can be nothing less. No one has pressed this point with more conviction than Van Til. I'm immensely grateful to P&R for issuing these new editions of Van Til's major works with insightful editorial annotations by Scott Oliphint and William Edgar.

—James Anderson, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary

Does the defense of the faith require evidences? Absolutely, as long as they are accounted for within the biblical worldview. *Christian Theistic Evidences* deserves to be better known than it is. Historically, it represents Cornelius Van Til's first, revolutionary statement of presuppositional (or covenantal) apologetics. It contains all his major statements against the pretended neutrality of fact, of reason, and of foundations. Dr. Oliphint's masterful annotations clarify and enhance the beauty of the text. His introduction is pure gold. This is *must* reading for anyone who wishes apologetic method to be consistent with sound theology.

—William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics and John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture, Westminster Theological Seminary

Critics of Cornelius Van Til often complained that in Van Til's presuppositionalist apologetics there was no room for the use of evidences to verify the Christian faith. But Van Til often said that evidences were an important part of apologetics. In fact, he taught a required course on Christian evidences at Westminster Theological Seminary. Now the textbook for that course is available again in a new edition with an introduction and new footnotes by Scott Oliphint of Westminster, who has produced recent editions of other Van Til works. *Christian Theistic Evidences* is Van Til's philosophy of fact, his philosophy of science, and as such it should interest everyone who seeks to understand Van Til's work.

—John M. Frame, Author, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*

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CORNELIUS
VAN TIL

Second Edition,

including the complete text of
the original 1978 edition

Edited by K. Scott Oliphint

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Contents

Preface

The present study contains two parts. The first part was used by the author for a number of years as a class syllabus on Christian Evidences.[1] The main contention of this syllabus was to the effect that the traditional Butler-Analogy type of argument for the factual truthfulness of Christianity is basically defective.[2] Its basic defect is to be found in the fact that, with Arminian theology, it begins by assuming that the enemies of the gospel of Christ are right in holding that man is, or may be, self-explanatory, and that the facts of his environment are, or may be, purely chance-produced and directed.[3]

1. The catalogs of Westminster Theological Seminary indicate that Van Til taught a course entitled "Christian Evidences" from 1930 until the late 1950s. The topic of evidences was among the first he addressed in his teaching career.

2. Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752) was the most influential Protestant apologist of the eighteenth century. The book to which Van Til refers, entitled *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736), was a defense of Christianity against the deism of the day. Butler uses a double negative argument to argue from the natural religion of the deists to the probability of revealed religion as well. The basic thrust of Butler's argument is that this (observed) life and the (unobserved) afterlife, taken together, exhibit features that resemble known features of this life taken alone. For example, we can infer that this life is a training ground for the next life from the way in which the early years of this life are a training ground for the later years. Parenthetically, the reader should note that the term "analogy" is not used in the same way by Butler, Aquinas, and Van Til—which is one reason why confusion remains with respect to the term itself in apologetics.

3. When Van Til says that Butler, via Arminianism, "begins by assuming" the notion of man as self-explanatory and with facts as "purely chance-produced," he is not articulating what Butler (or Arminians) actually *say*, but is highlighting the inevitable conclusions of a system that begins with a supposedly neutral notion of probability and of rationality and a notion of man's freedom to which even God is subject.

A true method of Christian Evidences[4] must start with the interpretation of man and his universe as given to him on the absolute authority of Christ speaking in Scripture in order then to show that unless this is done man abides under the wrath of God and his speech is meaningless.[5]

The appendix contains a portion of a series of three lectures given at Calvin Theological Seminary in October 1968. It deals with essentially the same subject as the first part. Its argument is to the effect that the method of more recent non-Christian scientific methodology is bankrupt because it insists that man can know nothing of God and yet speaks in all its utterance about God. As a consequence recent scientists make an absolute separation between an abstract law of logic which is like a turnpike in the sky, and an infinite number of purely contingent facts, not one of which is distinguishable from another.[6]

4. By a "method of Christian Evidences," Van Til means a proper, Christian way of understanding, and appealing to, evidences, whether in science, apologetics, or any other discipline.

5. The dual consequence of "[abiding] under the wrath of God" and "meaningless" speech illustrates the deep, inextricable connection that Van Til rightly sees between man's covenantal status before God (wrath) and how that status affects everything that we do (including our speech and its proposed meaning). Van Til is not saying that the speech of unbelief is meaningless in that it cannot be understood or examined. He is saying that the unbeliever, due to his rebellion against God, is unable to make sense even of those things he articulates. God, as Van Til says repeatedly, is the only ground for meaningful predication.

6. A quotation elsewhere from Van Til on the relation of facts to logic may help the reader to understand him here: "But usually the traditional apologist is neither a pure inductivist nor a pure *a priorist*. Of necessity he has to be both. When engaged in inductive argument about facts he will therefore talk about these facts as proving the existence of God. If anything exists at all, he will say, something absolute *must* exist. But when he thus talks about what *must* exist and when he refuses even to admit that non-believers have false assumptions about their *musts*, let alone being willing to challenge them on the subject, he has in reality granted that the non-believer's conception about the relation of human logic to facts is correct. It does not occur to him that on any but the Christian theistic basis there is no possible connection of logic with facts at all. When the non-Christian, not working on the foundation of creation and providence, talks about *musts* in relation to *facts* he is beating the air. His logic is merely the exercise of a revolving door in a void, moving nothing from nowhere into the void. But instead of pointing out this fact to the unbeliever the traditional apologist appeals to this non-believer as though by his immanentistic method he could very well interpret many things correctly." See Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 262. As for his notion of logic as a "turnpike in the sky," Van Til was once asked what he meant by that, to which he replied, "I meant there is no way to get on it." See Cornelius Van Til, "At the Beginning, God: An Interview with Cornelius Van Til," *Christianity Today* 22 (December 30, 1977): 22.

The Butler type of argument is again shown to be helpless. It cannot apply the message of Christ as the Way and the Truth to this situation. Only on the presupposition of the truth of the words of the self-attesting Christ as available in the Scriptures can man, with his scientific enterprise, be saved.

General Introduction

The studies presented in this series are written with a view to the defense of the doctrine of the free grace of God through Christ as he testifies of himself in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. They are written from the point of view of one who believes the Reformed Faith to be the most truly biblical expression of the Christian Faith. They are written from the point of view of one who believes that a world that lies in darkness needs, therefore, to hear about the Reformed Faith.

Moreover, if the world needs to hear the Reformed Faith, the statement of this Faith must be true to the historic Reformed creeds. The Reformed Faith, to be heard, must, therefore, be set over against Neo-orthodoxy.

These studies are merely student syllabi; they are not to be regarded as published books.[1]

These studies are produced under the auspices of the *Den Dulk Christian Foundation* of Ripon, California.

1. This is an important point to remember. Van Til's intent in writing this work was simply to produce a syllabus for a course he taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Introduction

We preface our discussion in this course by a few general remarks about the nature and purpose of Christian evidences. Evidences is a subdivision of apologetics in the broader sense of the term. If we take apologetics in its broad sense we mean by it the vindication of Christian theism against any form of non-theistic and non-Christian thought.[1] This vindication of Christian theism has two aspects. In the first place, Christian theism must be defended against non-Christian science. It is this that we seek to do in the course in Christian evidences. Evidences, then, is a subdivision of apologetics in the broader sense of the word, and is coordinate with apologetics in the more limited sense of the word.

Christian-theistic evidences is, then, the defense of Christian theism against any attack that may be made upon it by "science." Yet it is Christian theism as a unit that we defend. We do not seek to defend theism in apologetics and Christianity in evidences, but we seek to defend Christian theism in both courses. Then, too, in the method of defense we do not limit ourselves to argument about facts in the course in evidences nor to philosophical argument in the course in apologetics. It is really quite impossible to make a sharp distinction between theism and Christianity and between the method of defense for each of them.[2]

1. This is a helpful, one-sentence explanation of what Christian apologetics is meant to be.

2. This statement needs to be kept in mind all along. There is no separation to be made between theism and Christian theism in apologetic methodology. If it is the *truth* that we are defending, it can be found only in *Christian* theism, not in a generic theism. Thus, apologetics is a defense of *Christianity* as a whole, not of a mere theism.

Nevertheless, in evidences it is primarily the factual question with which we deal. Christianity is an historical religion. It is based upon such facts as the death and resurrection of Christ. The question of miracle is at the heart of it. Kill miracle and you kill Christianity. But one cannot even define miracle except in relation to natural law.

Thus, we face the question of God's providence. And providence, in turn, presupposes creation. We may say, then, that we seek to defend the fact of miracle, the fact of providence, the fact of creation, and, therefore, the fact of God, in relation to modern non-Christian science.

We may as well say, therefore, that we are seeking to defend Christian theism as a fact. And this is really the same thing as to say that we believe the facts of the universe are unaccounted for except upon the Christian theistic basis. In other words, facts and interpretation of facts cannot be separated. It is impossible even to discuss any particular fact except in relation to some principle of interpretation. The real question about facts is, therefore, what kind of universal can give the best account of the facts. Or rather, the real question is, which universal can state or give meaning to any fact.[3]

Are there, then, several universals that may possibly give meaning to facts? We believe there are not. We hold that there is only one such universal, namely, the triune God of Christianity.[4] We hold that without the presupposition of the triune God we cannot even interpret one fact correctly. Facts without the triune God of Scripture would be brute facts.[5] They would have no intelligible relation to one another. As such they could not be known by man.

3. In this paragraph, Van Til is making it clear that, once man takes any fact and attempts to understand it, that understanding will be inextricably linked to his understanding of the way(s) in which that fact relates to other facts and to the world generally. Thus, every individual fact is thought to be what it is in relation to one's understanding of everything else. This "everything else" that pertains to the fact is what Van Til means by "universal."

4. Van Til speaks here of God as a "universal" only for pedagogical reasons. If one thinks that facts, to be meaningful, must be related to a universal, then the triune God is the only universal that can, ultimately, give meaning, definition, and understanding to any fact or to the relation of fact to fact.

5. That is, a fact that is related to nothing else, which is impossible, has no interpretation. A fact without an interpretation would be a "brute fact." But brute facts cannot exist, since every fact is what it is by virtue of God's plan in and for creation. Moreover, any fact that is given an interpretation that excludes the triune God and his plan is, to that extent, not known, in that its interpretation is false.

Suppose, then, that we take the "system" of Christian theism and think of the attacks that are made upon it by science. We may for convenience take the six divisions of systematic theology and note in turn the attacks that are made upon our doctrines of God, of man, of Christ, of salvation, of the church, and of the last things. Every attack upon one of these is an attack upon the whole system of truth as we hold it.[6] For that reason the answer to each attack must be fundamentally the same. We shall, in each case, have to point out that the explanations offered by non-Christian views are no explanations at all inasmuch as they cannot relate the facts discussed to all other facts that must be taken into account. Worse than that, these "explanations" spring from an ethical opposition to the truth as it is in Jesus, the self-attesting Christ. Yet, in order to work according to orderly procedure, we shall first notice the attacks made upon the doctrine of God, then those upon the doctrine of man, and so on till we come to the doctrine of the last things. Thus we have before us a broad outline picture of the road ahead.

It remains only to remark on the meaning of the scientific attack we have mentioned above. When we speak of evidences as the vindication or defense of Christian theism against science we take the word science in its current meaning. We think first of the results of science, real or imaginary. These results are before us in various fields. Physical science seems to have come to some definite conclusions about spiritual life. Social science seems to have come to some definite conclusions about the origin and nature of human society, and historical science seems to have come to some definite conclusions about the course of historical events. Even though there be much disagreement among modern scientists working within a given field, and among scientists working in different fields, there is a common negative attitude toward Christianity among them.

Together with thinking of the results of science as they are offered to us in various fields, we must think of the methodology of science. Perhaps there is greater agreement among scientists on the question of methodology than on the question of results. At any rate, it is quite commonly held that we cannot accept anything that is not consonant with the result of a sound scientific methodology.

6. This is the case because Christian theism is a coherent system, based upon the authority of Scripture, whose author is God himself (see Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.4).

With this we can as Christians heartily agree. It is our contention, however, that it is only upon Christian presuppositions that we can have a sound scientific methodology. And when we recall that our main argument for Christianity will be that it is only upon Christian theistic presuppositions that a true notion of facts can be formed, we see at once that it is in the field of methodology that our major battle with modern science will have to be fought. Our contention will be that a true scientific procedure is impossible unless we hold to the presupposition of the triune God of Scripture.[7] Moreover, since this question of methodology is basic to all the results of science, we shall have to devote our discussion largely to it. That is, we shall have to discuss it first so far as our systematic treatment of evidences is concerned. We shall, however, preface our systematic discussion with a brief survey of the history of evidences. From such a brief survey we may learn about much valuable material that we can use in our own defense of Christianity. We can also study the method of defense employed by apologists of the past.

Needless to say, the task that we have set before us in this preface is too great for us to accomplish with thoroughness. The field is too extensive. No scientist pretends to know the whole field of science with thoroughness. How much less can a layman pretend to do so? The discussion will, therefore, have to be largely general. Our hope is that a general discussion may not be false to the facts as experts know them. The chief major battle between Christianity and modern science is not about a large number of individual facts, but about the principles that control science in its work. The battle today is largely that of the *philosophy* of science.[8]

7. Note that Van Til speaks of a "true" scientific procedure. A scientific procedure cannot be "true" unless it acknowledges, and works within, the universe that God has made and that he controls.

8. This is crucial to keep in mind. No one would doubt that science can offer much that is useful with respect to the facts and their relations. The apologetic question, however, is to what extent non-Christian scientists can *account* for the methods and conclusions that they utilize.

CHAPTER 1

The History of Evidences

Butler's *Analogy*[1]

In this brief historical survey of evidences we cannot touch on all those who have written on the subject. We shall merely select for consideration some of the chief writers and more particularly Bishop Butler. The reason for this selection is obvious. Butler has virtually controlled the method of evidences in orthodox Protestant circles for two hundred years. His *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature* was published in 1736. It was meant to be a defense of Christianity against the thought of the day, especially against deism.[2] Accordingly, a short summary of the argument of the *Analogy* is our first task.

In his Introduction, Butler tells us what he proposes to do. He begins by making the distinction between probable and demonstrative evidence. The former admits of degrees from mere

1. This chapter is meant to be a summary of Butler's argument, and thus it contains a series of quotations from Butler. Van Til is quoting Butler in order to show many of the salient points of his argument and to summarize the main points of his approach. It is important to catch the flow of Butler's work in this chapter in order to highlight the differences between his approach and Van Til's approach in coming chapters.

2. Butler's argument was not against atheists, but against deists. Thus, Butler attempts to use some of the tenets of deism to argue for Christianity.

presumption to moral certainty, while the latter brings immediate and absolute conviction.[3]

The degree of probability that a certain event will take place may increase in proportion to the number of times that we have seen a similar event take place in the past. "Thus a man's having observed the ebb and flow of the tide to-day, affords some sort of presumption, though the lowest imaginable, that it may happen again to-morrow: but the observation of this event for so many days, and months, and ages together, as it has been observed by mankind, gives us a full assurance that it will."[4]

It is this sort of probability that we must act upon in daily life:[5]

> From these things it follows, that in questions of difficulty, or such as are thought so, where more satisfactory evidence cannot be had, or is not seen; if the result of examination be, that there appears upon the whole, any the lowest presumption on one side, and none on the other, or a greater presumption on one side, though in the lowest degree greater; this determines the question, even in matters of speculation; and in matters of practice, will lay us under an absolute and formal obligation, in point of prudence and of interest, to act upon that presumption or low probability, though it be so low as to leave the mind in very great doubt which is the truth. For surely a man is as really bound in prudence to do what upon the whole appears, according to the best of his judgment, to be for his happiness, as what he certainly knows to be so.[6]

But this is not enough. Butler goes on to point out that we must often act upon a chance of being right:

3. A demonstrative proof is one in which the conclusion flows inexorably from the premises. A probable demonstration, on the other hand, shows how certain evidences most likely point to a given conclusion. There is always room for error in a probable demonstration.

4. Joseph Butler, *The Works of Joseph Butler*, ed. W. E. Gladstone, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), vol. 1: *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, 3.

5. It is surely the case that probability plays a significant role in much of what we do on a daily basis. That is not the issue under scrutiny. The question we have before us is the apologetic question, that is, whether or not, *with respect to the truth of Christianity*, the best we have to offer is a probable demonstration.

6. Butler, *Analogy*, 6.

> For numberless instances might be mentioned respecting the common pursuits of life, where a man would be thought, in a literal sense, distracted, who would not act, and with great application too, not only upon an even chance, but upon much less, and where the probability or chance was greatly against his succeeding.[7]

In these quotations we have the heart of the probability concept upon which the *Analogy* is based. We are to argue that Christianity has at least a practical presumption in its favor. We are to be very modest in our claims. Even if there were only a mere chance that Christianity is true we ought to act upon its precepts. And if we act upon a mere chance of the truth of Christianity we are acting upon the same principle that we frequently act upon in daily life with respect to ordinary matters of experience.[8]

But Butler does not mean that there is no more than a chance of Christianity's being true. He thinks there is a considerable degree of probability that it is true. We shall see this in what follows. For the moment we must note on what basis such a probability rests. Probability in daily life rests upon analogy.

> That which chiefly constitutes probability is expressed in the word likely, i.e. like some truth, or true event; like it, in itself, in its evidence, in some more or fewer of its circumstances. For when we determine a thing to be probably true, suppose that an event has or will come to pass, it is from the mind's remarking in it a likeness to some other event, which we have observed has come to pass. And this observation forms, in numberless daily instances, a presumption, opinion, or full conviction, that such event has or will come to pass; according as the observation is, that the like event has sometimes, most commonly, or always so far as our observation reaches, come to pass at like distances of time, or place, or upon like occasions.[9]

7. Ibid., 7.

8. As we will see, the problem here is not that we do not act on probability; the problem is that Butler wants to include the facts of Christianity within the parameters of our everyday probable decisions. This serves to put Christianity on a par with the probable facts of our ordinary experience.

9. Butler, *Analogy*, 4.

This passage indicates something of what Butler means by "analogical reasoning." It is reasoning about unknown possibilities from the known "constitution and course of nature." This "constitution and course of nature" is our starting point as far as the facts from which we reason are concerned.[10] We take for granted that God has made and controls the "constitution and course of nature."[11]

The application of analogical reasoning to the question of the truth of Christianity as made by Butler can perhaps be best illustrated by quoting what he himself remarks about Origen:[12]

> Hence, namely from analogical reasoning, Origen has with singular sagacity observed, that he who believes the scripture to have proceeded from him who is the Author of nature, may well expect to find the same sort of difficulties in it, as are found in the constitution of nature. And in a like way of reflection it may be added, that he who denies the scripture to have been from God upon account of these difficulties, may, for the very same reason, deny the world to have been formed by him. On the other hand, if there be an analogy or likeness between that system of things and dispensation of Providence, which revelation informs us of, and that system of things and dispensation of Providence, which experience together with reason informs us of, i.e. the known course of nature; this is a presumption, that they have both the same author and cause.[13]

10. Van Til quite rightly highlights the fact that, for Butler, we are meant to found and ground our argument for Christianity on the basis of an analogy to an agreed upon notion of the natural world. Thus, argues Butler, just as the deist thinks "x" of the natural world, it is not beyond question that one could, *analogously*, think "x" of a supernatural world as well.

11. Butler, *Analogy*, 18.

12. Origen was born in Alexandria sometime around A.D. 185 and died around 254. He was one of the most prolific of the Eastern church fathers. Eusebius of Caesarea, the "father of church history," collected many of Origen's writings and wrote (with Pamphilus) an *Apology for Origen*. For more on Origen, see William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint, eds., *Christian Apologetics: Past and Present; A Primary Source Reader*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 157–72.

13. Butler, *Analogy*, 9–10.

Reason

These words of Butler really state the whole case. It will clarify matters fully, however, if we quote still further with respect to the place of human reason in the argument. Butler explains what use he makes of human reason by contrasting the position of Descartes[14] to his own:

> Forming our notions of the constitution and government of the world upon reasoning, without foundation for the principles which we assume, whether from the attributes of God, or any thing else, is building a world upon hypothesis, like Descartes. Forming our notions upon reasoning from principles which are certain, but applied to cases to which we have no ground to apply them, (like those who explain the structure of the human body, and the nature of diseases and medicines from mere mathematics without sufficient *data*,) is an error much akin to the former: since what is assumed in order to make the reasoning applicable, is hypothesis. But it must be allowed just, to join abstract reasonings with the observation of facts, and argue from such facts as are known, to others that are like them; from that part of the divine government over intelligent creatures which comes under our view, to that larger and more general government over them which is beyond it; and from what is present, to collect what is likely, credible, or not incredible, will be hereafter.[15]

It is not always easy to ascertain in detail just what place Butler assigns to reason, but in general it is plain. Broadly speaking, Butler

14. René Descartes (1596–1650) was born in Tours, France. At the age of ten, he was sent to boarding school, where he studied, among other things, Aristotelian philosophy for about nine years. When he was twenty-two, having earned a law degree, he became interested in mathematics. For him, mathematics was a discipline that truly bore the name *scientia*, since in it was the kind of certainty which Aristotelian philosophy could not provide. During the course of his travels in Europe, he determined in 1619 to found a new philosophy or philosophical system. Descartes is sometimes called the founder of the modern age, or of modern philosophy. His famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am" (*Cogito, ergo sum*), displays his rationalistic methodology.

15. Butler, *Analogy*, 10–11.

is an adherent of the empiricist school of John Locke.[16] Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* had appeared in 1690, two years before Butler's birth. In his early life Butler had taken careful notice of Samuel Clarke's attempt to give a demonstrative proof of the existence of God by the way of Descartes' *a priori* reasoning.[17] Butler found Clarke unconvincing. "Ever afterwards he was chary of Clarke's mathematical methods in philosophy, veering sharply toward the doctrines of empiricism and probabilism which he found in the study of Locke."[18]

It is of basic importance to understand the function of reason as Butler conceives it. We may learn more about the matter by turning to chapter 5 of his book. In this chapter he argues that even if by abstract reasoning we should be driven to the position of fatalism,[19] we should not be justified in rejecting the commands of religion. The reason for this is that we have a *practical experience of freedom.* The notion of necessity is "not applicable to practical subjects."[20] But if this be then interpreted as a reflection upon the powers of reason, Butler hastens to add:

> Nor does this contain any reflection upon reason: but only upon what is unreasonable. For to pretend to act upon reason, in opposition to practical principles, which the Author of our nature gave us to act upon; and to pretend to apply our reason to subjects, with regard to which, our own short views,

16. John Locke (1632–1704) is known as the founder of empiricism and of political liberalism. He was the son of a Protestant lawyer and landowner, John Locke Sr., and a Protestant mother, Agnes. From the age of fourteen, he was educated at Westminster School. In 1652, he went to Christ Church, Oxford, where he graduated in 1656. In 1683, because a number of Whigs were being arrested and because he was a known follower of the Earl of Shaftesbury, Locke fled to Holland, where he put his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* into final form. His last completed work was *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. He is considered to be one of the three main empiricists, along with George Berkeley and David Hume.

17. Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) was an English philosopher and Anglican minister. His cosmological argument followed more along the lines of Thomas Aquinas's third way, an argument from contingency to necessity. Clarke, however, made more explicit use of the principle of sufficient reason in his argument. In his college days, Butler began to correspond with Clarke.

18. Ernest Campbell Mossner, *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 1.

19. In whatever form, fatalism holds that the "constitution and course of nature" is all predetermined, such that there can be no real meaning to our actions and choices.

20. Butler, *Analogy*, 146–47.

> and even our experience, will show us, it cannot be depended upon, and such, at best, the subject of necessity must be; this is vanity, conceit, and unreasonableness.[21]

With the empiricists in general Butler wishes to make a certain reasonable use of reason.[22] Butler is severe on the Cartesian a priorism,[23] it seems, inasmuch as it ventures far beyond known fact, and inasmuch as it ventures to draw conclusions which he thinks are *contrary to fact*. When Clarke seeks to give a demonstrative proof of God he reasons, according to Butler, far *beyond* fact. When the fatalists argue against free will they reason, according to Butler, *contrary* to fact. But in putting the matter in this way we have not put it quite correctly. Butler does not really object to Clarke's reasoning beyond facts to the existence of God, but to Clarke's contention that such reasoning is demonstrative. Clarke's reasoning was supposed to be *demonstrative* because it was *a priori*. Thus it was likely to be contrary to fact because it was reasoning that disregarded facts or possible facts.[24]

The point with respect to the freedom of the will is basic to the whole matter.[25] Freedom is said to be a fact of experience. All reasoning must adjust itself to this and other facts. This constant necessity of returning to the facts clips the wings of reason. No reasoning can be absolutely conclusive except when it deals with the purely abstract. On the other hand, it "must be considered just to join abstract reasoning with the observation of facts." That is, we are justified because of the observed constitution and course of nature and because of the assumption of the "Author of nature," to reason from the known to the unknown.

21. Ibid., 147.

22. We should remember here that empiri*cism* does not negate the use of reason; it only seeks to argue that our knowledge has its foundation in experience, rather than in rational principles.

23. That is, "Butler is severe" on Descartes' rationalism, which sought to ground knowledge in *a priori* (i.e., rational) principles.

24. In other words, because Clarke attempted to reason from that which is contingent (and observable) to that which is necessary (and thus *a priori* and not observable), (1) he thought he was proposing a *demonstrative proof* (and not a probable conclusion) of God's existence, and (2) he was reasoning beyond observable facts (to that which is necessary).

25. By "freedom of the will" here, Van Til means, roughly, that one does have and must always have the power of contrary choice. So, to choose "x" entails that, in any and every circumstance, one could also have chosen "y," and that one could also choose "not x." It should be noted that even God does not have such freedom (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13).

When Butler applies these principles of reasoning to the question of Christianity he makes a twofold use of them. He makes, first, a positive use of them. It is based upon the idea that we can legitimately make conclusions about the unknown, assuming that it will be *like* the known.[26] In the second place, he makes negative use of them. The unknown, though we may expect it will be like the known, may also be *unlike* the known. When such a phenomenon as Christianity presents itself, we are, according to Butler, in a position to believe it is *like* the constitution and course of nature. There is a real continuity between nature and Christianity. But when men make objection to Christianity on the ground that it is so unlike what we know of nature, we fall back upon the argument from ignorance. We should expect, Butler would say, that the unknown will be to a considerable extent unlike the known, even when it is also like the known.

In order to make plain the meaning of these principles, and especially the function of reason according to Butler, we quote what he holds the place of reason to be with respect to the Scriptures and their content. In reply to certain objections made against Christianity, Butler says:

> And now, what is the just consequence from all these things? Not that reason is no judge of what is offered to us as being of divine revelation. For this would be to infer, that we are unable to judge of any thing, because we are unable to judge of all things. Reason can, and it ought to judge, not only of the meaning, but also of the morality and the evidence, of revelation. First, it is the province of reason to judge of the morality of the scripture; i.e. not whether it contains things different from what we should have expected from a wise, just, and good Being; for objections from hence have been now obviated: but whether it contains things plainly contradictory to wisdom, justice, or goodness; to what the light of nature teaches us of God. And I know nothing of this sort objected against scripture, excepting such objections as are formed upon suppositions, which would equally conclude, that the

26. Here "like the known" means "analogous to the known."

> constitution of nature is contradictory to wisdom, justice, or goodness; which most certainly it is not. . . .[27] Secondly, Reason is able to judge, and must, of the evidence of revelation, and of the objections urged against that evidence: which shall be the subject of a following chapter.[28]

A little later, when speaking of the credibility of a Mediator's coming into the world he adds:

> Let reason be kept to: and if any part of the scripture account of the redemption of the world by Christ can be shown to be really contrary to it, let the scripture, in the name of God, be given up: but let not such poor creatures as we go on objecting against an infinite scheme, that we do not see the necessity or usefulness of all its parts, and call this reasoning; and, which still further heightens the absurdity in the present case, parts which we are not actively concerned in.[29]

These are the main principles of reasoning as employed by Butler. By the use of these principles he proceeds to prove the reasonableness of both *natural* and *revealed* religion. We cannot follow him into the subdivisions of the argument. A selection from the section dealing with natural religion and a selection from the section dealing with revealed religion must suffice.

A Future Life

In the section dealing with natural religion, Butler devotes a good deal of space to the question of a future life. The argument hinges largely on the significance of the fact of death. Is death likely to be the end of all? To find out, we must turn to experience and reason from analogy. Although we have in our lifetime undergone much change, we have still survived. Therefore, it is likely that we shall also survive death. Butler says:

27. Butler, *Analogy*, 238–39.
28. Ibid., 240.
29. Ibid., 275.

> But the states of life in which we ourselves existed formerly in the womb and in our infancy, are almost as different from our present in mature age, as it is possible to conceive any two states or degrees of life can be. Therefore, that we are to exist hereafter in a state as different (suppose) from our present, as this is from our former, is but according to the analogy of nature; according to a natural order or appointment of the very same kind, with what we have already experienced.
>
> We know we are endued with capacities of action, of happiness and misery: for we are conscious of acting, of enjoying pleasure and suffering pain. Now, that we have these powers and capacities before death, is a presumption that we shall retain them through and after death; indeed a probability of it abundantly sufficient to act upon, unless there be some positive reason to think that death is the destruction of those living powers: because there is in every case a probability, that all things will continue as we experience they are, in all respects, except those in which we have some reason to think they will be altered. This is that *kind* of presumption or probability from analogy, expressed in the very word *continuance*, which seems our only natural reason for believing the course of the world will continue to-morrow, as it has done so far as our experience or knowledge of history can carry us back. Nay, it seems our only reason for believing, that any one substance now existing will continue to exist a moment longer; the self-existent substance only excepted.[30]

This passage affords an excellent illustration of the principle of likeness or *continuity*[31] on which Butler rests his reasoning from the known to the unknown. His positive argument for a future life depends upon the observed principle of continuity. In the immediately following section he deals with the main objections against the idea of a future life. In meeting these objections he uses his celebrated argument from unlikeness or *discontinuity*. The objections against the idea of a future life must spring, he says, either "from *the reason of the thing*, or from *the analogy of nature*." As to the former, he adds:

30. Ibid., 22–23.
31. Butler's word "analogy" is what Van Til means by "likeness" and "continuity."

> But we cannot argue from *the reason of the thing*, that death is the destruction of living agents, because we know not at all what death is in itself; but only some of its effects, such as the dissolution of flesh, skin, and bones.[32]

And as for the analogy of nature, Butler asserts:

> Nor can we find any thing throughout the whole *analogy of nature*, to afford us even the slightest presumption, that animals ever lose their living powers; much less, if it were possible, that they lose them by death: for we have no faculties wherewith to trace any beyond or through it, so as to see what becomes of them. This event removes them from our view. It destroys the *sensible* proof, which we had before their death, of their being possessed of living powers, but does not appear to afford the least reason to believe that they are, then, or by that event, deprived of them.[33]

We might stop at this point to ask whether Butler, in view of his empiricism, is entitled to make the distinction he does make between the "reason of the thing" and the "analogy of nature," but we are just now engaged in the nature of his argument from ignorance or discontinuity. Butler says that there is a strong probability for the general notion of continuance of the course of nature. We seek to find specific reasons for thinking it will not continue in the future as it has in the past. But we cannot find such specific reasons because we are in the dark about that future. This mode of reasoning is typical of Butler. For our positive contentions we rest on general probation raised against our positive contentions, we fall back on what he thinks of as legitimate ignorance.

In this connection it should be noted that Butler makes his ignorance or discontinuity apply not only to future events, but to present events as well. He extends the principle in these words:

> And besides, as we are greatly in the dark, upon what the exercise of our living powers depends, so we are wholly ignorant

32. Butler, *Analogy*, 24–25.
33. Ibid., 26.

> what the powers themselves depend upon; the powers themselves as distinguished, not only from their actual exercise, but also from the present capacity of exercising them; and as opposed to their destruction: for sleep, or however a swoon, shows us, not only that these powers exist when they are not exercised, as the passive power of motion does in inanimate matter; but shows also that they exist, when there is no present capacity of exercising them: or that the capacities of exercising them for the present, as well as the actual exercise of them, may be suspended, and yet the powers themselves remain undestroyed. Since, then, we know not at all upon what the existence of our living powers depends, this shows further, there can be no probability collected from the reason of the thing, that death will be their destruction: because their existence may depend upon somewhat in no degree affected by death: upon somewhat quite out of the reach of this king of terrors. So that there is nothing more certain, than that *the reason of the thing* shows us no connection between death, and the destruction of living agents.[34]

It becomes apparent from such an argument as this that it is the *bruteness or dumbness of the facts that is of basic importance for Butler.*[35] With it he meets the argument for fatalism; with it he also meets all objections to general morality and Christianity. His principle of unlikeness or discontinuity is based upon the idea of pure contingency as pervasive of all reality.[36]

We now have the main trend of the argument of Butler before us. There is one detail that we would instance in passing. It has to do with the relation of man to the animal. Butler himself voices an objection to his argument from ignorance by saying that according to it animals as well as man might be immortal. To this objection he replies by saying that natural immortality in animals would not

34. Ibid., 25–26.

35. For Van Til, "bruteness" or "dumbness" of the facts means that, for Butler, facts do not testify of the existence of God; they do not testify of *anything*. This assumes that facts are there for the interpreting, and are not pre-interpreted (because created) by God.

36. That is, there is discontinuity because there is no way to determine what the future will be. It is all a matter of contingency, or chance, and thus necessarily indeterminate.

imply rationality. But suppose it did, even that would be no argument against our own future life. In this connection he makes a statement that sounds very modern:

> There was once, prior to experience, as great presumption against human creatures, as there is against the brute creatures, arriving at that degree of understanding, which we have in mature age. For we can trace up our own existence to the same original with theirs. And we find it to be a general law of nature, that creatures endued with capacities of virtue and religion should be placed in a condition of being, in which they are altogether without the use of them, for a considerable length of their duration; as in infancy and childhood. And great part of the human species go out of the present world, before they come to the exercise of these capacities in any degree at all.[37]

At this point we recall that Butler presupposes an "Author of nature." We may find this presupposition inconsistent with his statement that there was prior to experience as great presumption against man's attaining to mature rationality as against the animal, but we should not forget that Butler himself does believe in God. He does not pretend to argue for the existence of God in this volume. He takes God's existence for granted.[38] Still he gives us at one or two places a fairly clear idea as to what he thinks an argument for the existence of God should be like. We quote:

> . . . taking for proved, that there is an intelligent Author of nature, and natural Governor of the world. For as there is no presumption against this prior to the proof of it: so it has been often proved with accumulated evidence; from this argument of analogy and final causes; from abstract reasonings; from the most ancient tradition and testimony; and from the general consent of mankind. Nor does it appear, so far as I can find,

37. Butler, *Analogy*, 37–38.

38. Again, Butler takes the existence of God for granted because he is arguing against deists, who themselves believe in a god.

> to be denied by the generality of those who profess themselves dissatisfied with the evidence of religion.[39]

To this passage another similar in nature may be added:

> Indeed we ascribe to God a necessary existence, uncaused by any agent. For we find within ourselves the idea of infinity, i.e. immensity and eternity, impossible, even in imagination, to be removed out of being. We seem to discern intuitively, that there must, and cannot but be somewhat, external to ourselves, answering this idea, or the archetype of it. And from hence (for *this abstract*, as much as any other, implies a *concrete*) we conclude, that there is and cannot but be, an infinite, an immense eternal Being existing, prior to all design contributing to his existence, and exclusive of it. And from the scantiness of language, a manner of speaking has been introduced, that necessity is the foundation, the reason, the account of the existence of God. But it is not alleged, nor can it be at all intended, that *every thing* exists as it does, by this kind of necessity; a necessity antecedent in nature to design: it cannot, I say, be meant that every thing exists as it does, by this kind of necessity, upon several accounts; and particularly because it is admitted, that design, in the actions of men, contributes to many alterations in nature.[40]

For the moment it is not necessary to analyze these passages that speak of the argument for the existence of God. We merely call attention to the fact that they present us with a problem. The question cannot be avoided whether the argument for God as thus briefly outlined by Butler rests upon the same foundation as, for instance, does the argument for a future life. We know that Butler says he "supposes," i.e., presupposes, the "Author of nature." We now see that he "supposes" it because he thinks God's existence can be established by a reasonable argument. On exactly what then does this reasonable argument rest? Is there another foundation beside experience and observation from which we can reason from the

39. Butler, *Analogy*, 12.
40. Ibid., 141.

known to the unknown? If there is, why may we not use that other foundation as a starting point for our reasoning with respect to a future life? If there is not, is not our argument for the existence of God of just as great or just as little value as our argument for a future life? What meaning is there then in the idea that we "suppose" an "Author of nature"? Are we not then for all practical purposes ignoring him? In other words, if God is presupposed, should not that presupposition control our reasoning? And in that case can we be empiricists in our method of argument?

Christianity

We come now to Butler's discussion of Christianity, and note at the outset something of his general approach to the question of the evidence for Christianity.

The first question to be asked in this connection is why there should be any Christianity at all. On this point Butler says:

> And indeed it is certain, no revelation would have been given, had the light of nature been sufficient in such a sense, as to render one not wanting and useless.[41]

According to Butler we are to consider Christianity:

> . . . first, as a republication, and external institution, of natural or essential religion, adapted to the present circumstances of mankind, and intended to promote natural piety and virtue: and secondly, as containing an account of a dispensation of things not discoverable by reason, in consequence of which, several distinct precepts are enjoined us.[42]

> By reason is revealed the relation, which God the Father stands in to us. Hence arises the obligation of duty which we are under to him. In scripture are revealed the relations, which the Son and Holy Spirit stand in to us. Hence arise the obligations of duty, which we are under to them.[43]

41. Ibid., 185.
42. Ibid., 188.
43. Ibid., 197.

> The essence of natural religion may be said to consist in religious regards to *God the Father Almighty*: and the essence of revealed religion, as distinguished from natural, to consist in religious regards to *the Son*, and to *the Holy Ghost*.[44]

Speaking further of our relations to Christ and the Holy Spirit, he adds:

> And these relations being real, (though before revelation we could be under no obligations from them, yet upon their being revealed,) there is no reason to think, but that neglect of behaving suitably to them will be attended with the same kind of consequences under God's government, as neglecting to behave suitably to any other relations made known to us by reason.[45]

These quotations give us considerable information as to what Butler means by Christianity and as to why he thinks revelation is necessary. But we must go back of what he says at this point to an earlier section of his book. In chapter 5 Butler discusses the question, "Of a State of Probation, as Intended for Moral Discipline and Improvement." In this chapter he gives expression to his views about man's original estate. We should know what he says on this subject in order to understand what he means by the necessity of revelation.

Having previously proved the moral government of God, Butler tells us at the outset of the fifth chapter that we are placed in this world "that we might qualify ourselves, by the practice of virtue, for another state which is to follow it. . . . The known end then, why we are placed in a state of so much affliction, hazard, and difficulty, is, our improvement in virtue and piety, as the requisite qualification for a future state of security and happiness."[46]

Naturally the point that interests us here is whether we are really placed, as Butler says, in this estate of affliction and hazard. Were we created perfect and then fell into sin? If we were created perfect and then fell into sin afterward, was there anything in the nature

44. Ibid., 198.
45. Ibid., 200.
46. Ibid., 106.

of things that made it difficult for us not to fall into sin? On these points Butler does not leave us in the dark. He says:

> Mankind, and perhaps all finite creatures, from the very constitution of their nature, before habits of virtue, are deficient, and in danger of deviating from what is right: and therefore stand in need of virtuous habits, for a security against this danger.[47]

This general statement really affords us sufficient information about Butler's position on man's original estate. Yet, since it is a matter of extreme importance, we quote him more fully on this point. He tells us that originally man had certain propensions that were not subject to virtue.

> For, together with the general principle of moral understanding, we have in our inward frame various affections towards particular external objects. These affections are naturally, and of right, subject to the government of the moral principle, as to the occasions upon which they may be gratified; as to the times, degrees, and manner, in which the objects of them may be pursued: but then the principle of virtue can neither excite them, nor prevent their being excited. On the contrary, they are naturally felt, when the objects of them are present to the mind, not only before all consideration, whether they can be obtained by lawful means, but after it is found they cannot. For the natural objects of affection continue so; the necessaries, conveniences, and pleasures of life, remain naturally desirable; though they cannot be obtained innocently: nay, though they cannot possibly be obtained at all. And when the objects of any affection whatever cannot be obtained without unlawful means; but may be obtained by them: such affection, though its being excited, and its continuing some time in the mind, be as innocent as it is natural and necessary; yet cannot but be conceived to have a tendency to incline persons to venture upon such unlawful means: and therefore must be conceived as putting them in some danger of it.[48]

47. Ibid., 120.
48. Ibid., 120–21.

Against this danger that we as finite creatures are in because of these propensions to external objects, we have a remedy in the cultivation of the habit of virtue.

> *Thus the principle of virtue, improved into an habit, of which improvement we are thus capable, will plainly be, in proportion to the strength of it, a security against the danger which finite creatures are in, from the very nature of propension, or particular affections.*[49]

In reading this argument, one might still be in doubt as to whether Butler is offering the fact of our "natural propensions" as an explanation for the original fall of man, though it is difficult to see how he could avoid doing it. But he tells us in so many words that he does explain the fall of man by the above considerations.

> From these things we may observe, and it will further show this our natural and original need of being improved by discipline, how it comes to pass, that creatures made upright fall; and that those who preserve their uprightness, by so doing, raise themselves to a more secure state of virtue.[50]

It appears, then, that Butler takes an essentially Arminian position with respect to the fall of man. Arguments similar in nature to that given by Butler may be found, e.g., in Watson's *Theological Institutes*[51] and in Miley's *Systematic Theology*,[52] *sub voce*.[53]

For Butler the very idea of finite perfection includes the idea of "propensions" to particular objects, which, if gratified, mean sin. He tells us that we cannot explain the fall of man simply by stating that man was made free.

49. Ibid., 122.

50. Ibid., 123.

51. Richard Watson (1781–1833) was a Methodist (Arminian) minister and teacher. His *Institutes* were influential in establishing Arminian theology in the Wesleyan tradition and were originally entitled *Theological Institutes or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity.* He began to publish the *Institutes*, which were the first attempt to systematize Wesley's theology, in 1823. His *Institutes* are dependent in places on Butler's arguments.

52. John Miley (1813–1895) was a Methodist (Arminian) minister and educator. His two-volume *Systematic Theology*, published in 1892, was used for decades to train Methodist ministers.

53. *Sub voce*, i.e., "under the respective heading," in this case, of the fall of man.

To say that the former [the fall of man] is accounted for by the nature of liberty, is to say no more, than that an event's actually happening is accounted for by a mere possibility of its happening.[54]

Continuing from that point he adds:

But it seems distinctly conceivable from the very nature of particular affections or propensions. For, suppose creatures intended for such a particular state of life, for which such propensions were necessary: suppose them endued with such propensions, together with moral understanding, as well including a practical sense of virtue, as a speculative perception of it; and that all these several principles, both natural and moral, forming an inward constitution of mind, were in the most exact proportion possible; i.e. in a proportion the most exactly adapted to their intended state of life: such creatures would be made upright, or finitely perfect. Now particular propensions, for their very nature, must be felt, the objects of them being present; though they cannot be gratified at all, or not with the allowance of the moral principle. But if they can be gratified without its allowance, or by contradicting it; then they must be conceived to have some tendency, in how low a degree soever, yet some tendency, to induce persons to such forbidden gratification. This tendency, in some one particular propension, may be increased, by the greater frequency of occasions naturally exciting it, than of occasions exciting others. The least voluntary indulgence in forbidden circumstances, though but in thought, will increase this wrong tendency; and may increase it further, till, peculiar conjunctures perhaps conspiring, it becomes effect; and danger of deviating from right, ends in actual deviation from it: a danger necessarily arising from the very nature of propension; and which therefore could not have been prevented, though it might have been escaped, or got innocently through. The case would be, as if we were to suppose a strait path marked out for a person, in which such a degree of attention would keep him steady: but

54. Butler, *Analogy*, 123.

> if he would not attend in this degree, any one of a thousand objects, catching his eye, might lead him out of it.[55]

We see from this that finite perfection is to be thought of, according to Butler, as a matter of proportion between natural and moral principles. According to this manner of thinking the fall is something that comes by degrees.

> Now it is impossible to say, how much even the first full overt act of irregularity might disorder the inward constitution; unsettle the adjustments, and alter the proportions, which formed it, and in which the uprightness of its make consisted: but repetition of irregularities would produce habits. And thus the constitution would be spoiled; and creatures made upright, become corrupt and depraved in their settled character, proportionably to their repeated irregularities in occasional acts.[56]

Butler's position with respect to man's original estate corresponds to his empiricism in general. The "Author of nature" finds certain facts with characteristics of their own when he creates the world. He cannot fashion a perfect man except in so far as he can manipulate these facts. These facts have from the outset an independent influence upon the course of history. In their own nature they constitute a source of danger to the moral principle in man. On this point, too, the position here taken by Butler is similar to that taken by the Arminian theologians and to that of Roman Catholicism.[57]

Man's Ability

Corresponding to what from the Reformed point of view must be called a low view of the original estate of man, is Butler's teaching on man's ability to do what God wishes him to do, after the fall. After

55. Ibid., 123–24.

56. Ibid., 124.

57. There is a formal agreement between Butler (and with him Arminianism) and Roman Catholicism in that both theologies posit something wrong in man even before the fall. Thus, it was not the case that everything God created was "good"; rather, man was either in need of something else (the *donum superadditum* in Roman Catholicism) or was inclined toward sin ("propension" in Butler) even before the entrance of sin in the world.

telling us that as men we do not seem to be situated as fortunately as we might be, he adds that we have no reason for complaint.

> For, as men may manage their temporal affairs with prudence, and so pass their days here on earth in tolerable ease and satisfaction, by a moderate degree of care: so likewise with regard to religion, there is no more required than what they are well able to do, and what they must be greatly wanting to themselves, if they neglect.[58]

This statement of Butler's may be compared with that of the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 25: "The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions." The contrast between Butler's view and that of the Westminster divines is basic.

Butler knows of no "corruption of man's nature." According to him man's reason is now virtually what it was when it was created, and man's will, though weakened by the habit of sin, is yet inherently as much inclined to the good as it ever was. Accordingly, Christianity need be no more than a "republication" of what was originally God's requirement, plus such requirements as the second and third Persons of the Trinity have seen fit to add to those of the first. From what we can learn of Butler, the first Person of the Trinity seems to have changed his relation to men very little, if any, on account of sin. At any rate, Butler definitely says that revelation speaks only of the Son and of the Spirit. Reason, even after the entrance of sin, continues to be able to know what needs to be known about the Father. Still further, there is no mention of the need of regeneration anywhere in Butler's *Analogy*. Butler limits the content of Christianity to the objective facts of the redemptive works of Christ. Man can accept this or he can refuse to

58. Butler, *Analogy*, 102.

accept of his own power. Here, too, Butler's point of view must be contrasted with that of the Reformed Faith. The latter holds that Christianity includes the subjective factors of regeneration and faith as well as the objective factors of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The Remedy for Sin

To understand clearly what Butler thinks Christianity is we must now consider briefly his discussion of the work of the Mediator. He finds that the idea of a Mediator is in analogy with what we may expect from the constitution and course of nature. All the bad natural consequences of man's actions do not always follow such actions. The "Author of nature" has afforded reliefs for many of the ills of natural evil. Thus there are several instances not only of severity, but also of "indulgence" in nature. We might conceivably think of a constitution and course of nature in which there would be no redress from evil at all. But, as a matter of fact, nature has a certain compassion. We quote:

> But, that, on the contrary, provision is made by nature, that we may and do, to so great degree, prevent the bad natural effects of our follies; this may be called mercy or compassion in the original constitution of the world: compassion, as distinguished from goodness in general. And, the whole known constitution and course of things affording us instances of such compassion, it would be according to the analogy of nature, to hope, that, however ruinous the natural consequences of vice might be, from the general laws of God's government over the universe; yet provision might be made, possibly might have been originally made, for preventing those ruinous consequences from inevitably following: at least from following universally, and in all cases.[59]

In this passage there lies before us what may be called the Arminian equivalent to the Reformed doctrine of common grace.[60]

59. Ibid., 256.

60. For Van Til's extended discussion of common grace, see Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

On it Butler is soon to build a more specific argument for the necessity of a Savior. Before doing that, he investigates the question as to whether we could possibly save ourselves. He concludes that it is unlikely that we could. People often ruin their fortunes by extravagance. Yet sorrow for such extravagance and good behavior ever after will not suffice to erase the evil consequence of their deeds. Then, too, their natural abilities by which they might help themselves are often impaired. All this being the case, Butler asks:

> Why is it not supposable that this may be our case also, in our more important capacity, as under his perfect moral government, and having a more general and future interest depending? If we have misbehaved in this higher capacity, and rendered ourselves obnoxious to the future punishment, which God has annexed to vice: it is plainly credible that behaving well for the time to come may be—not useless, God forbid—but wholly insufficient, alone and of itself, to prevent that punishment; or to put us in the condition, which we should have been in, had we preserved our innocence.[61]

Upon this foundation Butler now proceeds to bring in the revelation about a Savior:

> Revelation teaches us, that the unknown laws of God's more general government, no less than the particular laws by which we experience he governs us at present, are compassionate, as well as good in the more general notion of goodness: and that he hath mercifully provided, that there should be an interposition to prevent the destruction of human kind; whatever that destruction unprevented would have been. *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth*, not, to be sure, in a speculative, but in a practical sense, *that whosoever believeth in him should not perish*: gave his Son in the same way of goodness to the world, as he affords particular persons the friendly assistance of their fellow-creatures; when, without it, their temporal ruin would be the certain

61. Butler, *Analogy*, 259–60.

> consequence of their follies: in the same way of goodness, I say: though in a transcendent and infinitely higher degree.[62]

Still further, Butler finds an analogy in nature for the vicarious suffering of Christ:

> And when, in the daily course of natural Providence, it is appointed that innocent people should suffer for the faults of the guilty, this is liable to the very same objection, as the instance we are now considering. The infinitely greater importance of that appointment of Christianity, which is objected against, does not hinder but it may be, as it plainly is, an appointment of the very same kind, with what the world affords us daily examples of.[63]

Finally, if the objector should still continue to bring in further points that seem to him to be strange in the economy of Christianity, Butler falls back on the argument from ignorance.

> Lastly, That not only the reason of the thing, but the whole analogy of nature, should teach us, not to expect to have the like information concerning the divine conduct, as concerning our own duty.[64]

From the passages cited the nature of the argument for Christianity employed by Butler appears clearly. Little needs to be added on the question of miracles, which was, after the attack on them by Hume, to occupy such an important place in Christian evidence. The real defense of miracle rests upon the defense of Christianity as a whole. After having defended the concept of Christianity as a whole, Butler goes on to give the historical evidence for miracle, and meets the objection brought against them. He seeks to prove that the witnesses who gave testimony to the happening of miracles were trustworthy, that they had no cause for deceit, etc. All this is familiar.

62. Ibid., 261–62.
63. Ibid., 272.
64. Ibid., 275.

Yet there is one point to which we wish to call special attention. After having discussed several arguments for Christianity from prophecy fulfilled and miracle performed, Butler seeks to bring all of these arguments together into one whole. He says:

> I shall now, secondly, endeavor to give some account of the general argument for the truth of Christianity. . . . For it is the kind of evidence, upon which most questions of difficulty, in common practice, are determined: evidence arising from various coincidences, which support and confirm each other, and in this manner prove, with more or less certainty, the point under consideration. And I choose to do it also: first, because it seems to be of the greatest importance, and not duly attended to by every one, that the proof of revelation is, not some direct and express things only, but a great variety of circumstantial things also; and that though each of these direct and circumstantial things is indeed to be considered separately, yet they are afterwards to be joined together; for that the proper force of the evidence consists in the result of those several things, considered in their respects to each other, and united into one view: and in the next place, because it seems to me, that the matters of fact here set down, which are acknowledged by unbelievers, must be acknowledged by them also to contain together a degree of evidence of great weight, if they could be brought to lay these several things before themselves distinctly, and then with attention consider them together; instead of that cursory thought of them, to which we are familiarized.[65]

Butler then proceeds to bring all the evidence for Christianity and natural religion together into one argument. He supposes a person who is wholly ignorant of Christianity. Such a person is to be shown how largely natural religion is corroborated by Scripture, and how the two blend together. If this is done there will be no danger that such a person will see conflict between reason and revelation, "any more than the proof of Euclid's Elements is

65. Ibid., 328–29.

destroyed, by a man's knowing or thinking, that he should never have seen the truth of the several propositions contained in it, nor had these propositions come into his thoughts, but for that mathematician."[66]

After reviewing this argument as a whole Butler remarks as follows:

> This general view of the evidence for Christianity, considered as making one argument, may also serve to recommend to serious persons, to set down every thing which they think may be of any real weight at all in proof of it, and particularly the many seeming completions of prophecy: and they will find, that, judging by the natural rules, by which we judge of probable evidence in common matters, they amount to a much higher degree of proof, upon such a joint review, than could be supposed upon considering them separately, at different times; how strong soever the proof might before appear to them, upon such separate views of it. For probable proofs, by being added, not only increase the evidence, but multiply it.[67]

The nature of Butler's argument is clear. Butler thinks that he has done more than he need have done to make the practice of Christianity reasonable.

> And that the practice of religion *is* reasonable, may be shown, though no more could be proved, than that the system of it *may be* so, for ought we know to the contrary: and even without entering into the distinct consideration of this.[68]

If therefore there were no more than a presumption in favor of the truth of Christianity, men should act upon it. But Butler has shown, he thinks, that there is more than a presumption. He has shown that there is a great positive probability for the truth of Christianity. And that is all that reasonable men should require. If they require more they forget that satisfaction "in this sense, does not belong to such a creature as man."[69]

66. Ibid., 339.
67. Ibid., 350–51.
68. Ibid., 362.
69. Ibid., 364.

> But the practical question in all cases is, Whether the evidence for a course of action be such, as, taking in all circumstances, makes the faculty within us, which is the guide and judge of conduct, determine that course of action to be prudent. Indeed, satisfaction that it will be for our interest or happiness, abundantly determines an action to be prudent: but evidence almost infinitely lower than this, determines actions to be so too; even in the conduct of every day.[70]

Toward the end of the book Butler makes a point of telling us again exactly what his mode of procedure has been. He has sometimes, as in the case of fatalism, argued upon the principles of his opponents. Then, too, he has omitted the consideration of the "moral fitness and unfitness of actions, prior to all will whatever," and the principle of liberty itself.

> Now these two abstract principles of liberty and moral fitness being omitted, religion can be considered in no other view, than merely as a question of fact: and in this view it is here considered.[71]

What Butler says here is simply a restatement of his disregard of *a priori* reasoning. At an earlier point he absolutely rejected the validity of *a priori* reasoning. At the conclusion he seems to say that he, though admitting its validity, has simply omitted the use of it. He explains the difference between the two types of reasoning at this point in the following words:

> To explain this: that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones, is an abstract truth: but that they appear so to our mind, is only a matter of fact.[72]

At any rate, it is plain that the argument for Christianity as set forth by Butler is an argument that wishes to make its appeal to fact, first of all. After it has been shown that miracle and fulfilled prophecy are facts, that is, that such things as have been recorded

70. Ibid., 365.
71. Ibid., 367–68.
72. Ibid., 368.

have actually taken place, these facts must be shown to be in analogy with the facts as we observe them in the "constitution and course of nature." The tool with which we do the work of comparing one "fact" with another "fact" of a different nature is the "faculty of reason, which is *the candle of the Lord within us.*"[73]

With this we may conclude our summary of Butler's *Analogy* in order to see something of what later generations have done about its argument.

73. Ibid., 375.

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