

CE**Prof. Timothy Sedgwick****1998**

Reflecting how Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor see Christian faith given, Anglicanism may be understood as a worshipping community formed under the story of Christ where worship is the sacramental celebration or enactment of the story. But this is not to answer the range of questions that arise within the community of faith.

As a tradition evolves, as a community develops from one generation to the next, obvious questions shift or change and the sheer volume of the responses to the questions of the community increases. New responses generate arguments for and against. New positions develop. The development of tradition is, in this sense, a matter of complexification. But, if the distinct questions of how to deepen, share, mediate, and understand identity mediated in Word and sacrament (what may be called narrative identity) are kept in mind, then some order may be discerned among what are otherwise seen as competing claims about the essence of the tradition and Christianity itself. In fact, if the distinct questions are kept in mind, the broader basis or shape of Christian faith as sacramental, as given in the worshipping community (in Word and sacrament), may be seen instead of lost form view. These questions may vary but include:

1. How do we deepen the faith celebrated in a life lived?
2. How do we share the faith celebrated with those outside the community of faith?
3. How do we form the community in its celebration and life so to pass on the faith from one generation to the next?
4. How do we make sense of this faith in light of the world in which we live?

As the questions of deepening, sharing, mediating, and understanding, these are the questions of moral and ascetical theology, evangelical theology, sacramental theology, and philosophical or systematic theology.

By the 18th century these questions, as strains of the tradition, become hardened along lines of high church, low church, and broad church. Thinkers tend to focus more narrowly on one set of questions, often in reaction to others. It is hard to imagine (at least for me) any greater difference in the questions asked and so the answers given than that between the Cambridge Platonists seeking to articulate an orthodox understanding of Christian identity, Joseph Butler attempting to make sense of the faith in terms of the new sciences reflected in Newtonian physics, William Law giving voice to his mysticism and concern with classical ascetical discipline, and John Wesley calling for an evangelical revival.

Joseph Butler, 1692-1752; *Analogy of Religion* and *Fifteen Sermons*

Question: how do you make sense of Christian faith in light of the world about us?

Not the medieval world of Aristotle but the world of the new sciences--Francis Bacon, John Isaac Newton, etc.

After B.A. 1718, appointed preacher at Rolls Chapel in London, a congregation of largely lawyers. Here is where Sermons were given, then published in 1727. Explicit defense of Christianity in *Analogy of Religion* published 1736. Appointed bishop of Bristol in 1750 and then to Durham. No further works.

Newton and the new physics expressed in first law of physics: "for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction." Things not understood in terms of their ends (final cause) but in terms of cause and affect. This understanding is given expression in deism where God is the watchmaker. Problem within this view of the world is that scripture with its talk of God acting in history is incomprehensible or simply wrong. Scripture and sacraments false superstitions. At most, scripture provides a model for human life and sacraments are moral instruments.

Two schools rose in response to the naturalistic and atheistic philosophies.

Rationalist school, e.g. Samuel Clarke. Some things are eternally and immutably good and others eternally and immutably bad not matter how we feel about them.

Sentimentalists: most notably David Hume. Sentimentalists accepted new sciences and claimed that we said something was good and other things bad because of our feelings, because of our sentiments. Feelings, not reason, moved the human self. Made sense of sciences in that action was determined not by end but by feeling. The difficulty for

sentimentalists was why some things felt good.

Butler combined rationalist and sentimentalist thought by giving an account of feeling (sentiments) in relationship to judgments of reason. This required, first of all, an account of the nature of the human person, what we may call a moral anthropology. This account itself was understood as true or false not by appeal to some revealed authority of Christianity but to the experience and understanding of all people. Any other ground is to deny the nature of knowledge as contingent, as a result of previous causes, influences. The only legitimate appeal is that truth makes sense of experience of the world. Here is the modern basis for apology. Scripture and sacraments may form our experience or transform our experience, but we believe them because of the experience as that makes sense of our lives.

Butler assumes that God is creator, as he says, the author of Nature and Governor of the World. This he assumes is the God of Christian faith. Hence, in *Fifteen Sermons*, as in *The Analogy of Religion*, any account of religious faith and the Christian life must be in accord with our more general understandings of human life.

In his *Fifteen Sermons* Butler poses the question: what is the basis of moral obligations? Seeks to ground his answer in a moral anthropology, how we know the good and are able to act in accordance with the good. In this sense he moves from an account of moral obligation to an apology for the God of Christian faith. Method, as in *Analogy*, begins with particular, is inductive. See preface para. 12.

Reciprocity between appetites and reason: appetites and consequent affections present ends of action; when conflict arises conscience decides (preface paras. 14,18,24,25)

Nature of conscience: a faculty; superior principle of reflection; "not morely considered as a principle in his heart," and hence not merely a matter of rationality. 2.8 See also 2.13, 2.14 where Butler distinguishes between "mere power and authority" in which conscience is viewed as distinguishing between passions and the reflection of cool self-love

Human self moved by the right order of affections: 5.3

What then are the affection/sentiments that describe the human self?

First, claims coincidence between benevolence and self love, duty and benefit, obligation and the good: 1.4, 1.6, 3.8, 3.9, 5.1, 11.9, 11.11

Place of religion: "to procure, as much as may be, universal goodwill, trust, and friendship amongst mankind. . . . Our Savior has owned this good affection as belonging to our nature, in the parable of the Lost Sheep; and does not think it to the disadvantage of a perfect state, to represent its happiness as capable of increase, from reflection upon that of others." 5.5

Christianity a moral religion: "perfect goodness in the Deity is the principle from when the universe was brought into being, and by which it is preserved"; in fact, "general benevolence is the great law of the whole moral creation." 8.1. See also conclusion Sermon 11.

Butler offers a creation, incarnational theology, that is to say, moral obligation read from nature and prior to more particular religious knowledge. Religious knowledge clarifies and confirms natural knowledge. This minimizes the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, at least in terms of content.

Distinctiveness of Christianity reflected in emphasis on benevolence (universalism) and forgiveness. Religious virtue is "the perfection of goodness in love to the whole universe." 12.2 In Sermon 13 Butler goes on to identify love of God as delight in God. "God is the natural object of all those affections or movements of mind, as really as He is the object of the affections, which is in the strictest sense called love; and all of them equally rest in Him, as their end." 13.2 "The gain, advantage, or interest, consists in the delight itself." 13.5 "And the conclusion of the whole would be, that we should refer ourselves implicitly to him, and cast ourselves entirely upon him." 13.10 And again, "Religion does not demand new affections, but only claims the direction of those you already have." (13.12) . . . And finally, Butler concludes by denying that such love of God is for any other purpose than delight in God: "It is a great mistake to think you can love or fear or hate anything from consideration that such love or fear or hatred may be a means of obtaining good or avoiding evil." 13.13

The understanding of forgiveness is centered in sermons 8 and 9, "Upon Resentment" and "Upon Forgiveness of

Injuries." As a moral sentiment, Butler must ask from when resentment comes. His answer is that it arises from injustice. Hence, resentment itself is moral, better called "indignation raised by cruelty and injustice," an indignation appropriately desiring punishment whereby the moral order would be confirmed and effected. The end is "to prevent and to remedy such injury and the miseries arising from it." What is immoral is when resentment is hasty and sudden and becomes malice, seeking the injury of the other. Forgiveness is then the corresponding virtue to resentment. Since resentment, though justified, tends towards excess and abuse, it evokes resentment in excess in the other. The cycle of retaliation and revenge begins. Forgiveness is then the affirming of the more fundamental bond of unity between persons. It is "absolutely necessary" if there is to be beneficence between persons.

Does Butler move towards a moral religion and a creation theology where Jesus is simply a model? Or, is this an unintended consequence because he assumes an established religion in which word and sacrament connects us to God?

Is the understanding of moral order adequate? Does he adequately comprehend evil or does he rationalize it by assuming an order discerned only because he assumes an afterlife where virtue will be rewarded and vice punished? But his claim of afterlife (and punishment and reward) is not grounded in revelation but can only be grounded in his conviction that such an order is sufficiently experienced now that such a belief is a logical extension.

The lack of such a conviction of moral order is the distinguishing mark of post-modernity and hence rejection of persons such as Butler. But until the 20th century Butler was read and was persuasive. In other words, he comprehended the world as the educated understood it. However, if evil is radical, historical understandings of Christian belief about God's governance in history are in error. Question for contemporary apologues is then, what is an adequate understanding of God's purposes and the meaning of grace? Butler at least is suggestive in speaking of God's glory such that benevolence is the end of human life and not self-love.

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