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SPIRITUAL GAMBLING:

OR,

THE CALCULATION OF PROBABILITIES IN RELIGION.

BY

A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.



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SPIRITUAL GAMBLING.

THE temper which prompts a man in matters theological to deter his antagonist from a given course of thought by holding before him the terrible consequences of unbelief if certain doctrines should turn out to be true, will show itself from time to time until the controversies which feed it shall have received their ultimate solution. That it should show itself at the present time, when blows dealt on traditional opinions, as such, fall thick and fast, is not at all surprising ; but we should scarcely have looked for it in a journal which, although not among the sprightliest and most entertaining, has seldom failed to place before its readers solid and wholesome food, and which has been marked for a long series of years by its candid assertion of the right to examine all disputed questions with the single reference not to consequences but to truth.

This has been especially the case in its dealings with the New Testament Scriptures. The idea that any one should be deterred from examining them as he would examine any other book, because the consequences of reaching a wrong conclusion may be fatal, has been dismissed as ridiculous. It has asserted that neither pre-possession nor authority should be suffered to influence our estimate of the evidence on which our judgment must rest. It has asserted the incompetence of the Anglican communion "to say that a doctrine or

a fact is true because it forms part of their teaching, because it has come down to them from antiquity, and because to deny it is sin." It has dealt summarily with Paley's notion that traditional Christianity rests on the veritable testimony of twelve independent witnesses, whose teaching and attestations are preserved to us in four genuine narratives, written by the authors whose names they bear. The remarkable common element which runs through three of these narratives constitutes, we have been told, "a resemblance too peculiar to be the result of accident, and *impossible* to reconcile with the theory that the writers were independent of each other." The reader was left in no doubt of the author's meaning. He was asked to say what he would think if in two or more accounts of the same events he were "to read the same incidents told in the same language" and "related in words which, down to unusual and remarkable terms of expression, were exactly the same."

"Suppose, for instance, the description of a battle: If we were to find but a single paragraph in which two out of three correspondents agreed verbally, we should regard it as a very strange coincidence. If all three agreed verbally, we should feel certain it was more than accident. If throughout their letters there was a recurring series of such passages, no doubt would be left in the mind of anyone that either the three correspondents had seen each other's letters, or that each had before him some common narrative which he had incorporated in his own account; . . . and were the writers themselves, with their closest friends and companions, to swear that there had been no intercommunication and no story pre-existing of which they had made use, and that each had written *bona fide* from his own original observation, an English jury would sooner believe the whole party perjured than persuade themselves that so extraordinary a coincidence should have occurred."

These remarks were applied directly to the Synoptic Gospels,—the conclusion being that, as these phenomena were manifested by those documents, we have in them, so far as they are thus identical, not three narratives, but one narrative, and that, too, a narrative written by neither of the so-called Synoptic Evangelists, but existing before them as common material on which they worked, unless indeed we suppose that they met and drew up their history together. These facts alone, it was asserted, furnished a full justification for examining these alleged independent narratives as we would examine any other human compositions; and the whole point of the writer was that all were bound to satisfy themselves on the subject by a keen and rigid scrutiny, no matter what might be the consequences.

It is scarcely necessary to say that this writer is the historian whose name appeared on the cover of Fraser's Magazine as the Editor, until the appearance of the number for September 1874, in which the Rev. Malcolm MacColl comes forward to counteract, neutralise, or destroy the effect of the method and counsels of Mr Froude. It is not, of course, pretended that magazines or journals generally should profess the infallibility which prevents a paper like the *Times* from admitting that it has made or can make a mistake; but if there is to be a change of method or principle in the conduct of a review, it would be well to avow it. If this avowal had been made in the case of Fraser's Magazine, when Mr Froude's name ceased to appear on the cover, we could have said nothing. As it is, we have simply to note the fact that the journal has been used in order to deter men from walking on the road in which, according to Mr Froude, it is our duty to walk.

Mr MacColl's subject is the anonymous work on Supernatural Religion, of which the *Dublin Review* has promised to furnish, some day or other, a refutation which shall show its egregious ignorance and thorough

worthlessness.* Such refutation as Mr MacColl can produce he honestly produces at once. He further admits that the author's mind "appears to be not more distinguished by a sincere love of truth than by (what is perhaps even more rare) a conscientious thorough-going logic which" generally "faces boldly . . . the conclusions, whatever they may be—to which his premises inevitably lead." His object is to show "the vulnerable points, and even fatal fissures, in the reasoning by means of which the author arrives at his conclusions." This he is perfectly justified in attempting: but he prefaces his criticism with an alternative, the legitimacy of which is rather assumed than proved. "Of any Christianity which is not dogmatic, history," Mr MacColl tells us, "knows nothing. The morality of the Gospel divorced from its dogmas may be admirable and beautiful; but it is not Christianity in any

* The author of this work assuredly needs no defence from me; nor should I have felt called upon here to take notice of the criticisms with which Dr Lightfoot has chosen to begin his assault upon that work in the *Contemporary Review*. Dr Lightfoot may in subsequent papers have something important to say on the main arguments and strong points of the book; and if this should be the case, we shall be bound to listen to him attentively, and to examine his reasoning with impartiality. But the course which he has taken lies open to grave objection, in the interests of the belief which he seeks to support. If the author of *Supernatural Religion* be in any way a formidable antagonist—if his arguments respecting the evidential value of miracles have any cogency—if the genuineness of the fourth gospel or of the other three be a point of any importance, then assuredly these questions should be grappled with at once. Whether of the two writers Dr Lightfoot be, or be not, the more punctiliously accurate scholar, is, for those who are really in earnest in the controversy, of little consequence or none. Nor does it show any wisdom to be unduly impressed by imputations of defective scholarship made by one theologian against another, inasmuch as in any given case it is at the least possible that the point alleged may turn out to be an open question, and possible also that the assailant himself may be proved to be in the wrong. That this may be so in Dr Lightfoot's case is probably not unlikely, if we may judge from Mr Fennell's very able and dispassionate letter in the *Examiner* for December 19, 1874. Probably, unprejudiced readers will think that Dr Lightfoot's objections and criticisms have been effectually disposed of by the author of *Supernatural Religion* himself in the *Fortnightly Review* for January 1875.

real sense." He therefore cordially agrees with the writer of *Supernatural Religion* "in reprobating the abortive efforts of many among us to whittle away the characteristic dogmas of Christianity, one by one, and yet retain the withered husk as a religion capable of influencing human conduct. Christianity is a divine revelation undiscoverable by human reason, though not necessarily on that account unreasonable; or it is a pernicious superstition. Its founder is very God, miraculously born, miraculously restored to life after undergoing a literal death, miraculously living for evermore in a world unseen and spiritual, and in that case no dogma of Christianity is antecedently improbable . . . or Christ is not what the creed of Christendom has always represented him; in which case Christianity is an imposture, and no arguments derived from the beauty of its moral precepts can justify us in upholding it for a single hour."

Mr MacColl enters parenthetically a gentle protest against the phrase *Ecclesiastical Christianity*, used by the author of *Supernatural Religion*, "as if there were a Christianity which is not ecclesiastical;" but from all who, in historical criticism, look only for truth, the string of alternatives put forth by Mr MacColl calls for the strongest and most emphatic condemnation. Here we have, ranged against each other, an array of tremendous and appalling conditions, which, if we allow ourselves to be impressed by either set, must affect the precision of our scrutiny and the impartiality of our judgment. If Mr MacColl had contented himself with dichotomy, there would have been no need to gainsay him. Not much is gained or lost by asserting that Christianity either is a divine revelation or it is not, that its founder is very God or he is not; but it is quite another thing to propound the dilemma that it is either a divine revelation or a pernicious imposture,—still less defensible is it to parade this dilemma in the sight of people whose minds are likely to be stimulated

by it, not to examine into facts, but to forecast the terrible results which may follow the rejection of the utterances of God himself,—in other words, to indulge in the vice of spiritual gambling, a vice to which mankind has shown itself prone in almost all ages and all lands. That Mr MacColl has not resorted to the most offensive forms of this time-honoured manœuvre, we gladly acknowledge; but he shows himself an apt disciple in that unwholesome school in which Bishop Butler stands pre-eminent, when he leads people to enter on the inquiry with the wish to find that Christianity is a divine revelation rather than the wish to discover its imposture. The fact is that the two wishes are equally out of place, and equally wrong. It is a mere question of fact, and it is unjudicial to wish the facts to be anything but what they are. If it be asserted that the alleged dogmas of Christianity are undiscoverable by human reason, the fact that they are thus undiscoverable must be capable of proof; but it is also obvious that the fact can neither be completely established nor thoroughly disproved except through an examination of all the religious and philosophical systems of the world past or present. At once then we are launched on a vast historical inquiry; and the question is whether we are to enter upon it in a spirit of feverish apprehension lest we should find ourselves in an abyss of torment if, when we come to die, we have not reached the right conclusion, or in the quiet temper which feels that so long as we search honestly we must be obeying the law of the God of truth. If the former be meant, we should be told so openly, and then the advice given would assume some such form as this: "You are beings endowed with a rational mind, capable of sifting and weighing evidence, and prompted by a natural desire to sift and weigh it which is intensified by the importance of the subjects demanding attention. The matter which most demands your attention is your religion. The society calling itself the Christian Church comes before you

with certain doctrines and certain books. It is your business to find out whether these books are genuine and these doctrines true ; but remember that both alike tell you of a divine revelation sanctioned by astounding marvels as well as by fearful penalties for those who reject it, and terrible will be the lot of the human soul which, when its course on earth is done, finds that it has refused to believe the words of God himself. Still it is your bounden duty to satisfy yourself by the exercise of your reason, and you are further responsible for the path in which your reason guides you."

Except in the case of the few brave minds which cannot be scared from looking all alternatives and dilemmas boldly in the face, such talk as this is a virtual shutting of the door to all inquiry. Among the vast majority of men the gambling instinct will, under such conditions, assert itself and carry everything before it. Even if the Supernatural Revelation may not in fact have been given, still it will do them no harm to believe that it has been given. If, on the other hand, it has been given, they will by their acceptance have avoided giving offence to a Being who may condemn them to endless misery if they refuse to believe it. Such men, it is clear, will never think at all. Whether the religion which may thus be produced and grow up in them will have any substantive value, is another question.

As we have no intention of gambling after this fashion, we approach the issue of fact. Is it true that history knows nothing of any Christianity which is not dogmatic ? Assuredly such an assertion as this is not to be taken for granted on the mere word of Mr MacColl or of any one else. Is it, further, quite certain that dogmatic Christianity is all of one kind, and that if, say, in the first century, or the first half of the first century, we find dogmas in a moral or religious system which is called Christian, these dogmas at once establish the identity of that religion with the religion of Hildebrand or Calvin, Luther or Loyola ? When, again, did

Christianity, in any shape or form, begin? Was it fairly instituted when the twelve, we are told, were sent forth by Jesus to go and preach repentance and remission of sins among the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Was it in existence when after the Resurrection they received from him, as it is said, a larger commission? If so, had the dogmas then been promulgated which Mr MacColl deems essential to traditional Christianity? By his own admission, the only book which gives anything like a connected history of the Christian society for perhaps a generation after the Crucifixion, is the Acts of the Apostles. It would surely be no hard task to schedule the doctrines contained in that book; but if this were done in the words of the book without curtailment, modification, or addition, would the picture be altogether satisfactory to Mr MacColl or to Archbishop Manning? Can it be asserted that the terms in which Jesus is spoken of throughout that book propound his divinity in the sense in which it is defined by the Nicene Council? But we may go further. Mr MacColl reprobates the abortive efforts made by many to whittle away the characteristic dogmas of Christianity, one by one, and yet retain the withered husk as a religion capable of influencing human conduct. Does he find these characteristic dogmas in the Epistle of St James, assuredly one of the oldest documents (whether genuine or not) belonging to the Christian Church? Here we have the morality of the gospel, we need not say divorced from, but apart from the dogmas which are now identified with Christianity; are we to say then that, though the epistle may be admirable and beautiful, it is not Christian in any real sense? To be sure, if we regard the morality of this writer, whoever he may have been, as "withered husk," we come very near to the straw to which this epistle was likened by Luther; but unquestionably the writer imagined himself to be putting forth a system of religion capable of influencing human conduct; and it is altogether more

open to us to say that it is this religion which has done all the good ever achieved in Christendom, than it is for Mr MacColl to put forth alternatives which are unnecessary and, it may be, immoral. In short, so long as the epistle bearing the name of James exists, and so long as it is allowed by the orthodox to be a genuine portion of the New Testament canon, so long must it be admitted that a Christianity without dogmatism (in Mr MacColl's sense of the word) is known to history.

We come to the next alternative. Christianity is a Divine Revelation undiscoverable by human reason, or it is a pernicious superstition. The propositions may be taken separately. If it should turn out that Christianity, in whatever form, is a pernicious superstition, we shall be sorry for it; but the conclusion does not follow if the first question be answered in the negative. That question is strictly and wholly a question of fact. The doctrines of Christianity are undiscoverable by human reason, or they may be discovered by it. It is obviously impossible to answer this question except by scheduling the doctrines and then comparing them with the doctrines of all the religious systems which the world has seen. The task may be Herculean, but it is one which Mr MacColl is bound to have gone through before asserting his negative.

The first part of the anonymous work on Supernatural Religion is a very able argument in disproof of the positions maintained on the subject of miracles by writers like Mr Mozley and Archbishop Trench. This position confines them, he contends, within a vicious circle. The Divine Founder of Christianity performs the miracles which attest the truth of his teaching, and these miracles in their turn prove his divinity, while at the same time other miracles betray only their origin from the father of lies, and are wrought in support of the kingdom of evil. Further, he contends that whether in the Old Testament or in the New the appeal is always made from miracles to reason. If the

miracles are wrought in support of any doctrine which, in Mr Mozley's words, "is contrary to our moral nature or to a fundamental principle of religion," they are to be unhesitatingly rejected; but the act of rejection is the act of the mind, in other words, of reason, and thus the so-called support of revelation by miracles becomes superfluous.

But whatever may be its ability, the argument is scarcely needed; or, rather, the orthodox citadel may perhaps be best assailed by challenging them to produce the doctrines of Christianity which are undiscoverable by human reason. If among them we reckon the notion of a Paradise, of a Fall, of a Flood, and a new peopling of the earth, all these are found in the traditions of Aryan and Semitic tribes alike. If we look to the personal history of the Founder of Christianity, we find a series of incidents related of scores of Hindu and Greek heroes or deities. If we refer to the Crucifixion and Resurrection, we may find in Bunsen's volumes on "God in History" a list of murdered and risen gods, each of whom, like Jesus, is born at the winter solstice, and wins his victory after the vernal equinox. In the same volumes the reader will see quoted a passage from the rune-song of Odin, which sets forth the advanced eucharistic doctrine of later Christendom. The god "offers himself to himself on that tree of which no man knows from what root it springs,"—almost the very words of many a Christian hymn in glorification of the mysterious and life-giving cross. If we regard the idea of Mediation, we find it in the Persian Mithras as clearly as in that of the second person of the Christian Trinity; nor can it be said that the doctrine of a future life is more distinctive of Christendom than it was of the religious system of the ancient Land of the Nile. All this has, of course, been said again and again; but it must be repeated with obstinate pertinacity, so long as writers who proclaim themselves the defenders of Christianity

continue to assert the essential difference of things which are in their nature identical. The plan is a very old one, and we should be sorry to say that it has of late years been adopted by any with a definite consciousness of its unsoundness; but we cannot shut our eyes to the inconsistencies in which such writers have found themselves involved on the subject whether of doctrines or of miracles. Among these inconsistencies those of the late Dean Milman are strangely prominent. In his opinion there was an essential and unmistakeable difference between the miracles recorded in the gospels and all other miracles whatsoever; and yet he could lay special stress on the fact that on the mind of the time these miracles produced no permanent impression whatever. Wonder after wonder is noted by the Virgin Mother, as by others, who are said to have witnessed them, and by her, as well as by them, all seem in a few weeks or a few days to have been forgotten. The truth is that, just as the dogmas of Christendom are found elsewhere, so the miracles struck no new chord and roused no new sensation; and thus we come to the conclusion that Christianity is not a Divine Revelation of doctrines undiscoverable by human reason; although it by no means follows that this negative answer justifies a negation of the fact of Divine Revelation. The question turns on the meaning of the name, and that meaning may perhaps best be found in the term "Education of the World."

We thus see at once the absurdity of the alternative that, if Christianity be not a revelation of the kind required by Mr MacColl, it must be a pernicious superstition. What if Christianity be one of the phases through which the Great Teacher is leading the human mind onwards to fresh measures of knowledge and goodness? * What if the many forms which Christianity

* This is, in fact, admitted by Butler, when he asserts that *natural* religion was the product of a divine revelation. Looking to this statement, we can be under no doubt as to the sense in which the term Revelation was used by Butler in some parts of his work. Mr MacColl seems to have altogether forgotten this most important admission.

has assumed be simply the necessary results of certain ideas and notions, the entry of which into the mind of man was, from the conditions in which he found himself, inevitable? Is not this precisely the language which all sensible and sober-minded men, even amongst orthodox Christians, use in reference to Buddhism or Mahometanism, or even Brahmanism? Is it thought a wise or a temperate thing to stigmatise any of these systems absolutely as pernicious superstitions? Must not our judgment be formed by an estimate of the aggregate good or harm which they may have done in the world? To say that Mahometanism has made Arabs worse than it found them, that Brahmanism from the first did nothing but corrupt the Hindu mind, that Gautama Buddha in his protest against Brahmanic ceremonialism conferred no boon on the millions who embraced his faith, is simply to utter falsehoods which all but the narrowest and most ignorant of the so-called orthodox would acknowledge to be monstrous. Every one of these systems has done a certain amount of good, some of them have done a large amount of good. The same may be said of Christianity; and the remark applies to all these systems, without reference to their alleged supernatural origin. The good (or the harm), done by each is simply a question of fact, and in each case probably the judicial historian will allow that the good far outweighs the harm. How will the question be affected, if we admit that each was ushered in by a solemn array of miracles and wonders?

Still more invidious (the word is forced on us) is Mr MacColl's effort to involve his readers in a maze which shall bring them to the conclusion that Jesus Christ must be either Almighty God, all wise, all powerful, and all good, or an impostor and a knave. If there be mischief in all gambling, in this kind of gambling there is something inexpressibly shocking. The case with which we are dealing is much as follows. A man appears in Judea, who sets his face against the

popular religion. He charges it with heartless formalism, and its professors with deliberate insincerity: he proclaims the universal fatherhood of God, and he invites all who are weary and heavy-laden to take refuge in His love. He insists on the paramount need of a voluntary obedience to His law, and of a complete conformity of the will of man to the will of his Maker. With this Heavenly Father of all mankind he asserts himself to be in a direct relation; but he has not less claimed a direct relation between Him and the children of Adam. He may, however, have used language which in its mystic enthusiasm might be capable of indefinite expansion of meaning. After a short public ministry, during which according to one account or set of accounts the common people heard him gladly, he falls a victim to the bigotry of the ecclesiastical rulers; and in course of time, (it is impossible to say how soon), there gathers round his person a theology, the main features of which are marvellously like the features of other theological systems. What possible justification or excuse can we have for calling this man a knave, because some centuries later those who called themselves his followers saw in him the Only Begotten Son, existing from all eternity with God, and of one substance with the Almighty Father? Mr MacColl is perfectly well aware that no such claim can be found in the Synoptic gospels, or can even be drawn from them except by inferences absurdly strained. He knows also that, if he betakes himself to the fourth gospel, he is at once confronted with the question of the age and authenticity of that gospel; and to parade that gospel before us as a reason for propounding an alternative as unnecessary as it is horrible, is simply to throw dust in our faces. The very words used by Mr MacColl that the founder of Christianity is very God, miraculously born, miraculously restored to life after undergoing a literal death, miraculously living for evermore in a world unseen, may be applied to Adonis,

Osiris, Baldur, Memnon, to say nothing of a host of other deities. It is to this issue that the self-styled orthodox champions are more and more forcing the controversy. If they have any reason to dread the result, the responsibility of so driving it on lies on themselves; and I can but repeat here the question which I have already put in my remarks on Dr Farrar's *Life of Christ*.* I have there quoted a striking passage from Mr Mahaffy, which alone would be sufficient to disprove the assertion that Christianity consists of a series of doctrines undiscoverable by human reason, unless we choose to affirm that the religion of the ancient Egyptians was also a revelation of doctrines similarly undiscoverable. In fact they are the same doctrines, and precisely the same incidents are found in the story of their virgin-born, crucified, and risen god, who is their judge of departed souls. On what principle, as I have already asked, are we to say that in this case, and in every other, these incidents are all false, but that in the case of Jesus they are all true? We may affirm this, if we please; but the affirmation will be as much an assumption as the hypothesis of the Ptolemaic system that the sun revolved round the earth. If it should be discovered that the assertion in the one case is worth no more than it is in the other, and if mischief result from the discovery, the burden must lie on those who have insisted on driving the question to a false issue.

If I have spoken of Dr MacColl's dilemmas and alternatives as specimens of spiritual gambling, I have admitted that with him the gambling has not assumed its most offensive form. Bishop Butler is a greater offender; but an examination of the difference between him and Mr MacColl only shows how hopelessly the spiritual gamblers are at variance with one another. Throughout Mr MacColl's paper his supreme effort is to drive his readers into the orthodox belief (that is,

his own belief), on the ground that nature leaves them, and must leave them, in perpetual darkness, and that on all subjects connected with God and the relations of men with God it has nothing whatever to say. The statements are of vital importance. Mr MacColl, having quoted a passage in which the author of "Supernatural Religion," speaking of the beneficent government of God as exhibited in the universe, and in the world around us, lays stress on the duty of a reverent conformity with his laws as so exhibited, exclaims, "Admirable advice! But how does it square with the argument against supernatural religion? It is simply inconsistent with it, for it is an appeal to faith, not to reason; to revelation not to nature. Of such a being as the author here describes, reason apart from faith and nature apart from revelation tell us nothing at all. When I look abroad upon the face of nature and of human society, I behold traces innumerable of what looks exceedingly like caprice or malice" (of course, on the part of the Maker of the Universe,—otherwise the words would have no meaning). "I see fools in command of empires, and riches and honours heaped on those who least deserve them. I see virtue clad in rags and festering with sores, while vice is arrayed in purple and fine linen, and fares sumptuously every day. I see wretches who have proved themselves a curse to mankind, suffered to flourish and prosper, and allowed to die peacefully on their pillows; while, on the other hand, men eminently qualified in mind and disposition to benefit their race, are hurried out of life in the midst of their usefulness by a whiff of cold wind, or the stumble of a horse, or the folly of a tipsy engine driver. . . . Nor is it any answer to reply that all this is because men disobey the wise laws of the creator. For it is not those who disobey who are always punished. The innocent constantly suffer for the guilty, while the latter go unpunished and not unfrequently rewarded."

Whether this be a true picture of the world generally, we need not now trouble ourselves to inquire. The point to be noted is this, that religion supernaturally revealed is, according to Mr MacColl, in direct antagonism with all the conclusions to be drawn from a scrutiny of the natural world, that the latter can tell us nothing of a righteous and loving God, and therefore that natural religion is a misnomer, or a title for a conception which has no existence. With this position the whole argument of Butler's Analogy is in entire contradiction. We may take our choice, but we cannot maintain both; and if we abandon Butler's ground, it becomes absurd, and even monstrous, to say that the difficulties in the way of accepting Christianity are difficulties of the same kind as those which meet us in the way of natural religion, and that nature would lead us to look for that system of divine government by rewards and punishments (the latter being endless), which in point of fact we find revealed. Mr MacColl's argument, put briefly, is, that Nature points only to the existence of a very mighty, very wise, but very malicious and capricious demon. In short, his view of the Cosmos is precisely that which Mr J. S. Mill has put forth in the Essays which have been published since his death. But the argument of Butler is that essentially the same system is set before us by natural and by revealed religion; and if it be not this, it is simply nothing. If it be not true that "the beginnings of a righteous administration may beyond all question be found in nature;" if it be not true that these beginnings "show that the Author of nature is not indifferent to virtue and vice—so that were a man, laying aside the proper proof of religion, to determine from *the course of nature* only whether it were most probable that the righteous or the wicked would have the advantage in a future life, there can be no doubt but that he would determine the probability to be that the former would;" if it be not true that "*the course of nature*

furnishes us with a real practical proof of the obligations of religion ;”—then Butler has absolutely no ground to stand upon, and every copy of his “Analogy” becomes simply so many pounds or ounces avoirdupois of rubbish. The very solemnity of his appeal to the atheist or the doubter lies in this : Christianity is to him not a contradiction of natural religion, as it is to Mr MacColl, but “ a republication ” of it. “ It instructs mankind in the moral system of the world. . . . And, which is very material, it teaches natural religion in its genuine simplicity.”* All that it does further is to acquaint us “ with some relations we stand in, which could not otherwise have been known ” †—these being the relations definitely drawn out in the Nicene Creed, or in other symbols of the Church.

Thus far, the point (and it is one of vital importance) which we have to note is that the general view taken by Mr MacColl is absolutely irreconcilable with the conclusions which Butler employs as the indispensable foundation of his whole argument from analogy. We cannot, however, stop here. Nature, Butler argues, affixes penalties, physical or moral, or both, to the commission of certain acts, or to persistence in certain courses of conduct, and that too without reference to the knowledge or the ignorance of the offender. Knowledge will not enable him to steer clear of the consequences ; ignorance will not be taken as a plea barring or even mitigating punishment. There is every reason, he argues, for holding that the same law holds good in the spiritual world. “ If Christ be indeed the Mediator between God and man—*i.e.*, if Christianity be true ; if he be indeed our Lord, our Saviour, and our God, no one can say what may follow, not only the obstinate, but the careless disregard to him in those high relations. Nay, no one can say what may follow such disregard, even in the way of natural consequence.”

Throughout, there is not the slightest ambiguity in

* “Analogy,” Part II., ch. i., § 1. † *Ibid*, Part II., ch. i., § 2.

Butler's argument. We see precisely what he is driving at; and this conclusion is a direct appeal to that which must be termed the "gambling" spirit in mankind. We may assume (indeed, Mr MacColl would allow) that Christianity includes the several churches and sects of Christendom, except perhaps Unitarians. If so, it follows that the system of all these Churches and sects must be at bottom the same. All insist on belief in Jesus Christ as God, all set forth the same warnings and sanctions against unbelief or wrong belief. But Latin Christendom has a summary and more merciful way of dealing with both. It denounces unbelief and wrong belief as sins—the former, and possibly also the latter, as deadly sin. It forbids to its members the exercise of reason on matters belonging strictly to faith. It assures them of its power to carry them safely through all dangers, and to bring them finally to the haven of eternal rest and love. Examination is unnecessary; indeed, to enter upon it is wantonly to risk our salvation; for if the work be cut short by an accident at a point which falls short of the necessary degree of Christian faith, eternal damnation must be the consequence. With Butler all this is changed. He is addressing persons who, in his belief, have come to wrong conclusions, or who, refusing to come to any conclusion at all, declare themselves neutral. In either case he holds over them "the terrors of the Lord." "Christianity," he asserts, "being supposed either true or credible, it is unspeakable irreverence, and really the most presumptuous rashness, to treat it as a light matter. It can never justly be esteemed of little consequence till it be positively proved false. Nor do I know a higher and more important obligation which we are under than that of *examining most seriously* into the evidence of it, supposing its credibility, and of embracing it, upon supposition of its truth."

Now, it is clear that examination is impossible for

those who have never heard of the subject to be examined, and who are never brought within reach of the evidence. For Englishmen—perhaps for Europeans generally—he might say that it is so brought, and that all that is needed may be found within the boards of the New Testament; but it is not the case with the vast majority of all mankind. For *Christianity* in the passage just quoted, *Buddhism*, *Brahmanism*, or *Mahometanism* might be substituted in the streets of Nankin, the bazaars of Benares, and the mosques of Mecca; and the same terrors—in other words, the same appeal to the gambling spirit of man—may be made there to those who hesitate to accept the system of Gautama, the theology of the Puranas, or the Suras of the Prophet of Medina. The absurdity of this is, however, less monstrous than the course which Butler recommends to his real or supposed opponents. For them, the first and foremost duty is that of *serious examination of the evidence* on which rests the fabric of traditional or ecclesiastical Christianity—in other words, it is their business and their duty to ascertain what changes the system or religion called Christianity may have undergone since the time of its institution. They have to determine, further, when and how it was instituted. They must obtain an accurate knowledge of the actual aims and desires of the founder. In order to do this, they must scrutinise the narratives which profess to tell the story of his life: they must see whether they are written by the writers whose names they bear—whether they are independent narratives—whether the narrators, from their associations and their education generally, are to be regarded as trustworthy witnesses—whether their reports are generally consistent, and whether they are borne out by other evidence, so far as it may have come down to us. They must further determine how far the ideas entertained of this founder by his followers have been modified in course of time in the way of exaggeration or in any other di-

rection. They are to enter on this examination with absolute conscientiousness, not in the least questioning the goodness or justice or love of God ; for the examiner in question might reply that really the subject had for him nothing to do with those divine qualities, but was concerned wholly with historical facts, with the authorship and the credibility of the gospels, and with the growth of that which is called Christian theology.

Let us imagine the examination begun and carried out by one who starts with thorough orthodoxy, but with a determination to be guided strictly by the evidence, and to give his judgment in accordance with the truth of facts, so far as it is possible to ascertain them. Let us imagine him slowly and unwillingly driven to the conclusion that the gospels were not written by the writers whose names they bear; that the synoptic gospels are not, as a whole, three independent narratives, but that they were either drawn up by a conclave of writers who, having met together, agreed to use the same words, or else were derived from some document common to the three, but written we know not by whom, or where, or when; moreover, that these alleged histories are the work of men who had little or no idea of the value of evidence—men whose associations deprived them of the power of weighing it, and to whom the idea of miracle carried with it no notion of anything extraordinary—men who were familiar with the idea of evil spirits to whom they ascribed all the phenomena of lunacy—men who held themselves fully acquainted with the gradations of the angelic hierarchy and the functions of all the classes of demons; that there is no reason for supposing that any narrative of the ministry of Jesus was put together for some thirty years or more after the crucifixion, and that the fourth gospel was composed very much later; that this fourth gospel gives an account of his ministry which it is impossible to reconcile with that of the synoptics; that the portrait of Jesus here given corresponds in very

few indeed of its features with the picture drawn of him in the other gospels; that, so far as we may see, the ideas entertained of Jesus in the third or fourth century were not entertained of him in the first; that in the generation which immediately followed his death, and in which one or two of his personal disciples are said to have been most prominent, we find a Christianity almost wholly free from dogmatism (as in the epistle bearing the name of James), and that the dogmatism contained in it is extremely different from that of the Nicene Council; that the great change in the position of some of the Christian disciples of the first century was wrought by Paul of Tarsus, and that in the writings attributed even to him we find a theology differing widely from that which generally passes for the ordinary creed of Christendom; that when we come to look into the matter of the gospels, we find a large number of serious inconsistencies and contradictions, that the story of the nativity and early years of Jesus as narrated in the third gospel cannot be reconciled with the story told in the first, and that the general framework of the narrative, in the miraculous conception and incarnation, in the nativity and visit of the Magi, in the lives of demoniacs or the raising of the dead, in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, is much the same as that which is found in the legends of the gods of many other countries besides Judea.

All these are conclusions reached by the supposed orthodox inquirer, after ample study and grave deliberation, on common matters of fact. Taken together, they may be fairly said to constitute the serious examination which Butler regards as the most important obligation incumbent on any or all of us. And yet, what is the result? It has been undertaken earnestly and reverently; it has been carried on patiently; it has been completed slowly, perhaps, and reluctantly. The conclusion is, that in the four gospels we have not four independent narratives mutually supporting each other,

but two distinct narratives which are practically in complete contradiction; that not one of the gospels was written by the person whose name it bears; that the name of the writer of the document which the synoptic evangelists used in common is unknown; that we know no more of the time when that document was composed; that of Jesus himself we know only enough to be sure that the picture drawn of him in the fourth gospel is not a true picture; and that the twelve independent witnesses who are supposed to establish the truth of traditional Christianity vanish into thin air. All these, it must be repeated, are answers to questions of fact. With morality and the conduct of life they have, it would seem, no concern. Yet they have brought the orthodox examiner to a standing-ground which makes it impossible for him to profess the Christianity whether of Bishop Butler or of Mr Mac-Coll; and, according to the author of the "Analogy," he has incurred the most terrible of moral or spiritual penalties because he has honestly carried out the injunctions which bade him examine seriously the evidences of Christianity. From the *intellectual* conclusions reached on purely historical questions never-ending damnation may follow, so Butler seems to tell us, as naturally as gout and other diseases may follow from persistence in debauchery. Assuredly Butler never meant this. He honestly thought that he had fairly examined the evidence himself, and that all who examined it would be brought to the same conclusion as his own. Had he thought that the result would be different with honest men honestly acting in accordance with his own advice, probably his eyes would have been opened, and he would have seen that the system set forth in his "Sermons on Human Nature" needed no supplementing with the perilous gambling of his "Analogy." He would have seen the thorough worthlessness of a religion based on a cold calculation of probabilities as to whether Christianity be true or false,

or whether Jesus be a god who can punish or a man who besought his fellow-men to trust themselves to the love and mercy of his Heavenly Father. He might then have pictured to himself the Maker of all worlds and all men as looking down on his creatures, before whom he had placed historical evidence which was more or less sure to lead honest men, honestly examining it, into conclusions which he had banned as damnable, and as damning them accordingly; and he would have been horrified by an image which he would have allowed to be in harmony only with the nethermost hell.

The truth is, that this gambling is ludicrously uncalled-for, and that it has no place, and can find no room, in those Sermons on which the fame of Butler must really rest. The system set forth in those Sermons has no need of Incarnation, Mediation, Sacrifice, Atonement, or any other dogma common to the creed of Christendom and the mythologies of Semitic and Aryan tribes; and the question is, whether Butler, as the author of the Sermons, is to be regarded as beyond the bounds which, in his "Analogy," he seems to define as the limits of salvation. In the former, the man seems to speak freely and from his own inmost conviction; and the gist of what he says is, that everyone in every land who loves God and does what is right is accepted by Him. Is it so in the "Analogy?"

Thus far the champions of traditional dogmatic Christianity have been sedulous in their efforts to bring men to accept their own belief through fear of the awful consequences which they may incur by rejecting it, if it should turn out to be true. The picture so drawn seems to relate chiefly to man and to his condition in a future state of existence. Let us for a moment reverse the picture, and with all reverence contemplate the spirit or disposition which it attributes to the Being whom these champions of Christendom proclaim to be perfectly Holy, Wise, Just, and

Merciful. It represents him, in fact, as looking upon mankind, and seeing among a section of them which bears the name of Christian a large proportion sitting down to calculate the consequences of accepting or rejecting an alleged miraculous and dogmatic revelation, with the understanding that they are bound to be religious if it be true, and, as it would seem, not bound if it be untrue. What would be the value, even in human eyes, of such a religion as this? From what deep spiritual yearning can it be said to spring? By what generous motive can it be said to be animated? The self-styled orthodox have been loud in their expressions of horror at the profaneness of those whom they denounce as unbelievers. It is time that those who seek only to know the Truth, and to obey the laws of Truth and Righteousness, should point out the far greater profaneness of which these orthodox persons are themselves guilty. Nothing, it is obvious, can be more profane than a picture which represents the Divine Being as looking with approval on men who profess to love him, or rather to accept a certain belief about him, because they are afraid of the consequences of rejecting it, and again as regarding with wrath those who earnestly hold it to be their duty to "do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God," if these should have convinced themselves that the narratives of the gospels are not historically trustworthy. Such modes of thought and speech can be only demoralizing; and, in face of the present aspect of scientific discussion, they betray nothing less than absolute infatuation.